

## Go Big or Go Home

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Not since the Reagan era has our country committed itself to a sustained, multiyear rebuilding of our military. At that time, the impact was transformative: it proved pivotal in winning the Cold War and continued to deliver capabilities decades after President Ronald Reagan left office. Today, we are at another pivotal moment; unless we go big on defense, any effort to sustain US military preeminence and realize the lofty goals of our National Defense Strategy (NDS) will be futile regardless of how much reform we try to squeeze out of the Pentagon.

Some may ask why arguing in favor of a peacetime buildup is relevant to a discussion centered around defense reform. It is true, all too often, in my view, that when experts discuss reform, they tend to refer to measures that might result in “efficiencies” or “more bang for the buck.”<sup>1</sup> No doubt, participants in this conference will devote their energy toward highlighting fiscal inefficiencies, bureaucratic acquisition processes, antiquated accounting practices, and bloated management structures as areas ripe for reform. This well-trodden path, though laudable and essential, would play only “small ball” when our country needs to make some big moves.

Traditional defense reform will not deliver a force that can execute the NDS or alter spending so drastically that the Pentagon could miraculously afford what it needs without additional funding. Defense reform, therefore, is no longer an epochal effort that catalyzes strategic change. Rather, it is something perennially sought that rarely delivers strategic effects.<sup>2</sup>

The defense reform I will advance in this paper begins with making a strategic choice our country has not made in over four decades: committing

The views expressed in this chapter are solely those of the individual author and do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization with which they are, or have been, affiliated.

to a peacetime buildup of our national defense guided by the twin strategic objectives of building a military force that can win today AND tomorrow. Delivering such a go-big force, however, will require a significant boost in defense spending to around Reagan-era levels.<sup>3</sup>

### *Going Big Is a Choice*

Reformers regularly critique the Pentagon for failing to make tough choices. Strategy, the argument goes, requires some form of sacrifice or the discipline to make do with less and ensure resources are spent judiciously on core areas of national interest.<sup>4</sup> A true strategist, therefore, lives in a world of trade-offs, choosing between sustaining conventional platforms or modernization, prioritizing unmanned systems over manned platforms, or focusing on the Indo-Pacific instead of Europe, to name a few of the most commonly referenced choices.<sup>5</sup> Those advocating the necessity of choice either believe the military should do less and therefore needs less, or they assume the military will have insufficient resources to complete all of its missions and must do less by necessity.<sup>6</sup> Though not necessarily ideologically opposed to robust American power, the latter camp adopts a pessimistic view of American economic strength or political will—twin essential ingredients for sustaining a robust military. Though for different reasons, both camps arrive at the same conclusion: that we ought to reduce our ambitions for the military.<sup>7</sup>

While choosing to do less is a reasonable choice, it is by no means the only choice available to the defense strategist. Choosing to go big and grow the military is legitimate, and I think the superior choice for the strategist and the nation given the state of the military and the global security environment.<sup>8</sup>

Foremost, we should choose to go big because that is precisely what the strategic moment requires. Our force must be capable of deterring adventurism in the present competition with China and others while also ensuring that we can prevail in any future twenty-first-century conflict. Robust investments in revolutionary technologies like quantum computing, artificial intelligence, and autonomy are critical. However, China's military expansion and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have demonstrated that conventional forces still matter: ships, submarines, tanks, fighters, bombers, munitions, and end-strength cannot be sacrificed in favor of a future capability that merely exists in a PowerPoint slide. We need to sustain our conventional capability to prevail in the current competition.<sup>9</sup>

To an outsider, it may seem curious to argue in favor of sustaining and growing today's force, given the US military's preeminence over the last four

decades. But today's force, in many respects, is yesterday's force with platforms that are often older than the troops who operate them.<sup>10</sup> Of the five administrations that followed President Reagan, all deployed the force in armed conflict or sought a peace dividend by reducing the size of an investment in the military. In other words, it has been over four decades since the military has seen sustained investment and growth outside the context of armed conflict.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, we should choose to go big because that is what our defense strategy has called for since 2017. In an era with few points of agreement between our political parties, there is remarkable continuity across the Trump and Biden administrations' defense strategies.<sup>12</sup> Each would have the United States lead in three primary regions: the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East. Each would seek to win—not simply manage—the competition against China and Russia. Each would also seek to deter Iran, North Korea, and terrorist groups. Climate change, of course, is the singular outlier reinforcing the overall continuity thrust across the two administrations. Delving into the details of each defense strategy, such as the force planning construct and global posture priorities, reveals that both the Trump and Biden administrations would have a US military postured globally and capable of deterring and, if necessary, defeating China while also deterring other adversaries.

In other words, the defense strategy presidents Donald Trump and Joe Biden advanced is a go-big strategy. Yet, each administration has failed to resource its strategy. The Trump administration's so-called "military rebuild" turned out to be a one-year defense bump that rightfully prioritized improving the readiness of the force following years of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan but never made the sustained investments in growth and modernization.<sup>13</sup> By the end of the Trump administration, the defense budget barely kept pace with inflation, and the gap between the strategy and reality widened.<sup>14</sup>

It has been a similar story during the first two years of the Biden administration: an ambitious strategy accompanied by an insufficient defense budget request. Making matters worse, spiraling inflation has effectively eliminated any real growth in the budget request. This has placed Biden's defense officials in the impossible position of trying to build an under-resourced force in service to a broad and expansive strategy.<sup>15</sup> This inevitably has forced difficult choices, though not the sort of choices that lead to growth or strategic outcomes. The results are swiss cheese concepts like "integrated deterrence" and "divest to invest," which justify retiring so-called legacy platforms, many

of which are strategically relevant and operationally viable. Combined with insufficient stockpiles of weapons and munitions, we are missing many of the basic elements critical to meeting the strategy outlined in the NDS.<sup>16</sup>

This glaring gap between strategy and resources was so apparent that Congress—notably a Congress with Democratic majorities in both chambers—felt it necessary to increase the defense budget over and above Biden’s request in each of the past two years.<sup>17</sup> Congress did not allow the force to hollow out and instead authorized and appropriated increases that gave the Department of Defense (DoD) 3 percent real growth in fiscal year (FY) 2022 and 5 percent real growth in 2023, a total additional investment of around \$70 billion.<sup>18</sup>

### *Funding the Strategy: 3 to 5 Percent Real Growth Is Not Enough*

Even with congressional attempts to bridge the gap between strategy and resources, there is reason to doubt whether these funding efforts alone will be enough to see the defense strategy sufficiently resourced and executed. The Trump NDS stated that the DoD’s goals are to defend the homeland, to remain the world’s preeminent military power with a favorable balance of power, and to uphold an international order conducive to our security. The Biden NDS establishes similar lofty goals. It assumes global responsibilities to deter China and Russia simultaneously while tackling other state actors, terrorism, and transnational challenges.

Both strategies identify the ends but leave out the means. Both strategies correctly identify the problems but lack the resources to address them.<sup>19</sup> The back-of-the-envelope budget that the 2017 bipartisan National Defense Strategy Commission endorsed called for 3 to 5 percent growth annually. According to the commission, the 3 to 5 percent benchmark was “indicative of the level of investment needed to meet the ends” established in the 2017 NDS.<sup>20</sup> In the seven years following the 2017 NDS, this threshold was achieved four times—FY2017, FY2020, FY2022, and FY2023 (only when Congress stepped in to appropriate above the threshold in FY2022 and FY2023). The remaining years saw effectively flat or declining budgets.<sup>21</sup> Had Congress sustained 5 percent growth annually from FY2018–23, the Pentagon would have had an additional \$375 billion to help place the military in a substantially more favorable position than it is in today.<sup>22</sup>

Ironically, this baseline, first advanced by former secretary of defense Jim Mattis and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joe Dunford, was tied to a

defense program that preceded the 2017 NDS and had not fully absorbed the breadth and reach of the new strategy.<sup>23</sup>

How much funding does the go-big NDS require? Reagan's peacetime military buildup averaged 6 percent of GDP.<sup>24</sup> This is the correct historical analogy and slightly higher than the 4.5–5 percent required for today's force.<sup>25</sup> Here's why: The fulcrum of the go-big strategy is sustaining, and in some cases building up, today's force and making the investments required to modernize the force for tomorrow. The current defense program falls short on both fronts.

### *Winning Today*

While a full inventory of capability shortfalls is beyond the scope of this paper, listed below is a high-level summary of six deficiencies in today's force critical to executing the NDS. Each presents a significant strategic vulnerability requiring urgent attention and resources if we are to prevail today.

- *Size of the Navy* With under 300 ships in its current battle force, the navy is significantly below its stated goal of 355 ships, with no plan to fill the void for decades. The Biden administration's April 2022 thirty-year shipbuilding plan would not reach the 355-ship threshold until after 2040.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, the navy's so-called 2045 plan would not deliver 375 ships until 2045. At the same time, the Chinese navy has 340 ships and is expected to grow to 400 by 2025 and 440 by 2030.<sup>27</sup> Both plans reveal significant vulnerability to the NDS goals in the two-decade interregnum as China races ahead in deploying a world-class navy. Accelerating shipbuilding will require increasing shipbuilding accounts and demand capital investments in shipbuilding capacity. Several years of focused congressional oversight concluded that squeezing more shipbuilding out of the current industrial base is nearly impossible.

A prime example is attack submarines, or SSNs. Few experts would contest the argument that the navy should increase its output of attack submarines, yet industrial capacity constraints and retirements will result in fewer total SSNs in the coming years than we have today.<sup>28</sup> As the NDS Commission concluded, "to project and sustain combat power into the Western Pacific and other theaters, the Navy must dramatically recapitalize and expand its military sea-lift forces."<sup>29</sup>

- *Fighters and Bombers* A similar tension of balancing near- and long-term needs applies to fighter aircraft, with the total combat aircraft inventory scheduled to decline from 1,970 to 1,800 beginning in FY2023.<sup>30</sup> Amidst this reduction in airpower, Congress has prohibited retirements of capable aircraft, like the F-22 Raptor and the F-18, on the grounds that the platforms remain relevant to today's fight and new capabilities—be they manned or unmanned—are not yet ripe for production.

The B-21 Raider's extended range and large payload, coupled with next-generation stealth technology, is a game changer in the expansive Indo-Pacific theater.<sup>31</sup> Yet, we are years away from the B-21 coming online and unlikely to have enough capacity to defeat our adversaries' increasingly sophisticated defenses. Like shipbuilding, the math continues to work against the size and capability of the force: we are retiring more capability than we are bringing online.

- *Weapons and Air Defense Shortfalls* Though the war in Ukraine has recently put US weapon shortfalls into the public discourse, this was a central focus of defense strategists going back to at least the 2017 NDS.<sup>32</sup> As the NDS Commission noted, "nearly any conflict between the United States and its most capable competitors would entail significant demand for long-range, high-precision munitions so that US forces can remain outside the range of advanced air defense systems and other anti-access/area denial capabilities."<sup>33</sup> The war in Ukraine has only reinforced the urgency and scale of the problem. Capacity limitations within existing production lines are not limited to now well-known weapons like HIMARs, Stingers, and Javelins but plague production lines across the spectrum. In the first three months of the war, the United States provided over a third of its stockpiled Javelins and a quarter of its stockpiled Stingers.<sup>34</sup> Again, Congress has taken initial steps to make capital investments in production lines but the effort is not comprehensive and will require sustained support.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, air and missile defense systems remain a high demand/low availability capability. In December, the United States shifted two surface-to-air missile batteries from the Middle East to Ukraine to fend off Russia's brutal missile campaign against its cities, leaving the Middle East with a capability gap that will not be backfilled for two years.<sup>36</sup> It's a similar story for Taiwan, which also seeks US air and missile defense systems and long-range precision weapons as it

postures against Chinese aggression.<sup>37</sup> Last year, Boeing was forced to delay the Harpoon Coastal Defense System's delivery to Taiwan by one to two years.<sup>38</sup> The limiting factor to supporting both partners is insufficient capacity.<sup>39</sup>

- *Overseas Basing* Basing is an area that receives little attention but is no less critical to posturing the military in accordance with the NDS. It is perhaps the most significant component of what the 2022 NDS refers to as "campaigning." This focuses "on the access and warfighting requirements that enable our efforts to deter potential [Chinese] and Russian aggression against vital US national interests, and to prevail in conflict if deterrence fails."<sup>40</sup> Specifically, distributing forces and hardening bases are critical steps toward implementing "campaigning" in the Indo-Pacific. To meet this goal, Congress authorized over \$6 billion of the Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI) to improve posture and presence, accounting for over half of PDI's total authorization.

Yet, PDI has received only tepid support from the Pentagon. In FY2023, Congress nearly doubled the Biden request for PDI.<sup>41</sup> As one analyst noted, "the Pentagon's request left US Indo-Pacific Command with \$1.5 billion in unfunded requirements."<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the Pentagon plan would shrink PDI by more than a quarter to \$4.4 billion by FY2027. Notably, that is the date by which China aims to accelerate its military modernization with an eye on seizing Taiwan.<sup>43</sup> There remains much more to be done in the years ahead: "Despite the Pentagon's focus on a more distributed posture, over three-quarters of posture funding in the initiative is concentrated in Japan and Guam . . . projects in the Second Island Chain, Oceania, and Southeast Asia account for a small portion of investment."<sup>44</sup>

- *Nuclear Weapons* Though Vladimir Putin's nuclear saber-rattling in Ukraine, and China's rapid nuclear modernization, have elevated public awareness of nuclear weapons, the necessity of a credible nuclear deterrent has long been the cornerstone of the NDS. Absent modernized strategic forces, the United States will not be able to deter a second adversary in the event we find ourselves in a conflict with a major power. Fortunately, nuclear modernization is one area where the words of the NDS have consistently been backed up by action. To date, efforts to recapitalize all three legs of the nuclear triad have received sufficient funding, and all three programs are

approaching production. Yet, our current nuclear deterrence delivery systems are reaching the end-of-service life in the 2025 to 2035 time frame. The replacement programs can, therefore, ill afford funding interruptions or programmatic setbacks to ensure there are no gaps in capability when the legacy systems age out. This will require significant investment over the next twenty years.

Strategic weapons are not the full story, however. Tactical nuclear weapons have reemerged in military strategy as Russia and China have modernized and produced these weapons and integrated them into their military doctrine and operational concepts.<sup>45</sup> Though these developments were foreseeable, military planners and nuclear strategists have not adequately prepared a response to them. Plans to add nuclear-capable cruise missiles have been stymied within the Biden administration,<sup>46</sup> once again leaving it to Congress to fund continued research on the sea-launched cruise missile.<sup>47</sup>

- *Size of the Force* While the navy and air force—the two services at the heart of the NDS—will see modest growth, the FY2023 National Defense Authorization Act lowered army end-strength to 452,000—the smallest active-duty force since the start of the all-volunteer force in 1973. While recruiting woes explain the dramatic drop, some argue that our shift to the Indo-Pacific justifies an army end-strength below 485,000 (the previous year’s authorized army end-strength).<sup>48</sup> This would be ill-advised: less than eighteen months ago, the army’s chief of staff said that a force of 485,000 soldiers was too small and that an ideal size would be closer to 540,000.<sup>49</sup> In other words, the army—even without its recruiting challenges—will be significantly below the end-strength levels required to meet the demands of the NDS, either for peacetime missions or preparing for contingency operations.<sup>50</sup>

These examples illustrate how the price of building and sustaining today’s force significantly exceeds the current defense program. Moreover, as noted above, the procurement costs of filling these capability gaps carry substantial capital investment costs. Taken together, these items, in addition to other areas of the defense budget that require real growth annually, such as the personnel, readiness, and operation and maintenance accounts, lead one to begin to appreciate the true cost of winning today.<sup>51</sup>



## Winning Tomorrow

The go-big strategy also demands sustained and increased investments in new technologies critical to winning tomorrow's conflicts. Both the 2017 and 2022 NDSs delineate the technologies and capabilities critical to the future force.<sup>52</sup> Integrating artificial intelligence and best-in-class software into current and future platforms, moving command and control to the edge of the battlefield, integrating space assets into military operations, and deploying cheaper (we hope) autonomous systems in the force are the sine qua non of tomorrow's force.<sup>53</sup> Here, the challenge resides not just with developing new technologies but also with transitioning these technologies from research, development, testing, and evaluation projects into programs of record and ready for production.<sup>54</sup> The double-digit real growth that DoD's space programs enjoyed in recent years serves as a template for what simultaneously investing in the capabilities of today and tomorrow looks like.

The go-big strategy necessitates that producing and fielding these technologies do not come at the expense of today's force while also ensuring efforts to strengthen today's force will not stymie modernization efforts. However, delaying the transition to tomorrow's force may be less an issue of budgetary trade-offs than an insufficient body of investment. A survey of the Pentagon's budget materials reveals the dearth of funding dedicated to critical technology areas, which according to the DoD, "will accelerate transitioning key capabilities to the Military Services and Combatant Commands."<sup>55</sup> Investment in the DoD's fourteen critical technologies combined with its funding of advanced component development and prototypes amounts to \$45 billion in FY2023. This includes \$10 billion toward hypersonics, a unique military capability that the United States has successfully tested only once and which the DoD cannot rely on the commercial sector to innovate and deliver.

Meanwhile, China has conducted numerous hypersonic missile tests, and Russia has used them in combat.<sup>56</sup> Put into context, this \$45 billion investment is around 5 percent of the total Pentagon budget and about a third of the Pentagon's Research, Development, Test, and Evaluation budget.<sup>57</sup> These numbers do not fully capture all technology investments. For example, autonomy and space are covered elsewhere in the budget. This snapshot does suggest that we are a long way off from the scale of investment required to replace air, land, and sea platforms with AI-infused autonomous systems. As one report noted, "for defense startups seeking to raise funds or live up to lofty valuations, the relatively small portion of the DoD budget allocated to

defense technology innovation may not be sufficient to attain scale unless they carefully consider their options.”<sup>58</sup> In comparison, China is leveraging its civil-military fusion to rapidly incorporate the achievements of its commercial sector into its military modernization. This is allowing China to quickly integrate revolutionary technologies that will shape the future of warfare.<sup>59</sup>

In 1981, the defense budget jumped from 4.5 percent of GDP to 5.7 percent of GDP and 6.5 percent of GDP in 1982.<sup>60</sup> Going big requires a similar jump from today’s spending levels of just over 3 percent to around 5 percent of GDP. This would enable the military departments to utilize today’s assets in the day-to-day military competition with China and Russia while allowing technology investments to mature and integrate into the force without an intervening capability gap. At the strategic level, these funds would allow the military to focus on the Indo-Pacific while also sustaining our security commitments in Europe and the Middle East. This is the essence of the go-big strategy.

### *Will America Support Going Big?*

Public opinion data demonstrates that Americans already support going big. The latest Reagan National Defense Survey, conducted in November 2022 after the midterm elections, found that about three-quarters (76 percent) favor increasing government spending on the military, including supermajorities across party lines with 68 percent favorability among Democrats, 72 percent among Independents, and 87 percent among Republicans. This support has been remarkably consistent across previous surveys, hovering at around three-quarters since the survey began asking the question in 2018. Not only do Americans support increasing defense spending, but 63 percent, including bipartisan majorities, also express concern that high inflation means the military cannot purchase as much equipment as it might need, leading to reduced military capabilities.<sup>61</sup>

Relatedly, Americans support US global engagement. According to the survey, a plurality (40 percent) believe it is better for the United States to be more engaged and take the lead regarding international events, while 32 percent believe we should be less engaged and react to events; 24 percent say it depends. Notably, support increases when the question becomes less abstract and more tangible. For example, regarding our forward-deployed military presence, 65 percent, including over 60 percent of both Democrats and Republicans, believe it is better for the United States to maintain military

bases around the world to deter attacks and respond quickly if something happens, while 27 percent believe the United States should reduce its military presence overseas and only deploy troops in response to aggression. This, too, has been remarkably consistent across four previous surveys.<sup>62</sup>

Americans' preference for a go-big strategy complements their views on Russia and China. Regarding the war in Ukraine, not only are 77 percent concerned about a Russian victory in the war, but a majority of Americans want to continue providing tangible support to the Ukrainians, even though the war had, at that time, dragged on for almost a year. With regard to America sending military equipment and financial assistance to Ukraine, a majority (57 percent) believe the United States must continue to stand with the people of Ukraine and oppose Russian aggression in order to protect a friendly democracy and prevent future Russian aggression in Europe. Only a third (33 percent) believe America has enough problems at home and cannot afford to spend more on the conflict and risk further provoking Russia. The survey also found that 59 percent are concerned about US military aid to Ukraine causing the United States to deplete its own weapons stockpile, which mirrors the percentage that would like to continue supporting Ukraine. This suggests that Americans believe we can and should support Ukraine and invest in replenishing our weapons stockpile.<sup>63</sup>

Looking at American views through a strategic lens, Americans generally align with the NDS and want the United States to oppose China and Russia. When asked where we should focus our military forces, a plurality (31 percent) say, East Asia, while 18 percent say we should focus them in Europe. Additionally, Americans understand the connection between Ukraine and Taiwan, as 71 percent are concerned that Russian aggression will inspire other authoritarian countries to invade their democratic neighbors. In fact, bipartisan majorities support efforts to deter a Chinese invasion of Taiwan: 61 percent support increasing the US military presence near Taiwan, and 58 percent support increasing arms sales to Taiwan.<sup>64</sup>

Despite the go-big strategy's popularity, Americans recognize that our military is currently not prepared and requires further investment. Considerably less than half (40 percent) think the US military is the best in the world in terms of overall capabilities when compared to other countries' militaries. Around the same percentage (43 percent) think the United States' conventional weaponry, such as tanks, battleships, and airplanes, is the best, and 37 percent think our military's high-tech weaponry, such as artificial

intelligence and missile technology, is the best. Only a quarter (25 percent) believe our military's cyber technology, cybersecurity, and cyber warfare are the best in the world.<sup>65</sup>

Contrary to the pronouncements from neo-isolationists and restrainers, the majority of Americans support the go-big strategy and support efforts to fund it.

### *The Role of the Reformer in a “Go-Big” Strategy*

This paper argues that the essential choice in executing the NDS is making a sustained, robust financial investment in the military. It is only upon committing to this choice that one can delineate which sort of defense reform initiatives will contribute to building the force of today and tomorrow. In other words, reform qua reform initiatives will, at best, be NDS neutral or, at worst, distract from the business of going big. Below are a few reform efforts that would enhance the execution of the NDS:

- *Budget Process* Much ink has been spilled on the antiquated defense budgeting process.<sup>66</sup> Budget reform of any kind will miss the mark if the Pentagon continues to submit budgets based on two-year-old assumptions and information. It is long overdue for the Pentagon to employ dynamic budgeting processes on par with the practices of Fortune 100 companies. It's foolhardy attempting to build tomorrow's force based on yesterday's old information.

Any budget reform discussion cannot overlook the harm of continuing resolutions that have become ingrained due to political gridlock and their normalization in the political process. Eliminating continuing resolutions seems fanciful given our current politics, but taking steps to mitigate its harmful effects on budget execution,<sup>67</sup> such as flexibility for “new starts,” would have a transformative effect on advancing DoD's strategic goals.<sup>68</sup>

- *Industrial Capacity* Whether building more Virginia-class submarines, increasing munitions production, or scaling up procurement of autonomous systems, the go-big strategy will place demands on the industrial base it cannot currently meet. Significant investments are needed along the lines of the “defense infrastructure” amendment recently authored by Senators Richard Shelby, Jim Inhofe, and Roger Wicker.<sup>69</sup> However, money is necessary but insufficient

to solve this problem as new manufacturing methods and processes will be required.<sup>70</sup>

- *Integrating New Technologies* The commercial technologies that will define the future force have yet to fully penetrate the walls of the Pentagon. Despite commitments from multiple secretaries of defense across Republican and Democratic administrations to help new, innovative companies overcome the so-called “valley of death,” only a handful can claim the much-vaunted program of record.<sup>71</sup> The Reagan Institute Task Force on Technology and Workforce offered several specific recommendations for the Defense Department on this point, including some form of reform to Pentagon management practices and acquisition policies.<sup>72</sup> Others have correctly argued that current acquisition processes and management structures undermine “on-time-based innovation, experimentation, and operational prototyping,” which are the coin of the realm for integrating private-sector innovation.<sup>73</sup> Absent these reforms, the military risks losing the attention and investment of America’s commercial innovation base.<sup>74</sup>

## Conclusion

The 2017 NDS Commission warned that anything short of its recommendation will require the Pentagon “to alter the expectations of US defense strategy and our global strategic objectives.”<sup>75</sup> In other words, the choice is binary: we either need to resource or change the strategy. Seven years later, we have done the opposite: expanded the strategy without committing to resourcing it.

Advocates of a strong US national defense posture often invoke President Reagan’s “Peace through Strength” philosophy, but it is worth reflecting on the meaning of that core principle. At the height of the 1980s military buildup, President Reagan argued, “Peace is not the absence of conflict, but the ability to cope with conflict by peaceful means.”<sup>76</sup> To ensure we can address today’s challenges, we need to commit to resourcing a strategy that prevails in the competition with China while holding off adversaries and spoilers in other regions. The alternative to the go-big strategy is to cede our military supremacy and go home resigned to becoming a regional power, an alternative we cannot accept. The peace President Reagan spoke of was not simply a campaign slogan but a policy mandate backed by an integrated budget and strategy leading to an end state where American interests, economic prosperity,

and freedom were secured by the strength of a well-funded military capable of outcompeting those who might do us harm. It's time we go big again.

## Notes

1. Peter Levine, "Can the Pentagon Save Its Way to Better Management?," *War on the Rocks*, August 6, 2019.

2. An example of epochal reform is Secretary Robert McNamara's creation of the Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System (PPBS), which centralized the entire DoD budget within OSD by creating a complete statement of costs over each platform throughout its life cycle. PPBS cemented the power of the Secretary of Defense over the service chiefs and permanently altered the Pentagon budgetary process. The PPBS (now PPBE, with "E" for execution) process has outlived its shelf life and is in need of major changes. See Commission on PPBE Reform, <https://ppbereform.senate.gov>.

3. Of course, there are strategies that go bigger. During the Cold War, the defense strategy called for a two-war construct. See Raphael S. Cohen, "Ukraine and the New Two War Construct," *War on the Rocks*, January 5, 2023. Cohen outlines how a go-big strategy could possibly be even larger. He proposes the Ukraine model, that the United States should be prepared for a major contingency and have the capacity to act as the "Arsenal of Democracy" by having the industrial base to allow our partners to win if they choose to fight.

4. Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy?: Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 7.

5. Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy?*, 4.

6. American power is being diluted and plummeting toward strategic insolvency. The United States can decrease commitments, live with risk, or build up, which Brands and Edelman argue is the correct strategic choice and not as fiscally daunting as it appears. See Hal Brands and Eric S. Edelman, "Avoiding a Strategy of Bluff: The Crisis of American Military Primacy," Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017, 2.

7. Roger Zakheim, "Restore Reagan's Military 'Margin of Safety,'" *Wall Street Journal*, August 28, 2022.

8. Critics point out that the United States is a bigger military spender than the rest of the world combined. This argument is deeply flawed. See Jim Talent, "US Defense Spending and False Comparisons," *National Review*, July 18, 2017.

9. US Senate, Armed Services Committee, *Hearing on Global Security Challenges and Strategy before the Senate Armed Services Committee*, 117th Cong. 3, 2022 (statement by Roger Zakheim, Director of the Ronald Reagan Institute).

10. Any budget growth went for readiness for counterinsurgency over combined arms training or loitering drones for stability operations instead of next-generation air superiority fighters. See Thomas G. Mahnken and Roger Zakheim, "Antiques Road Show: The Real State of the US Military," *The Atlantic*, July 27, 2019.

11. Mackenzie Eaglen, “Our Incredible Shrinking Military,” American Enterprise Institute, July 29, 2016.

12. US Department of Defense (DoD), *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, January 2018, 2; DoD, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, October 2022, 4–6.

13. US Senate, Armed Services Committee, *Hearing on Global Security Challenges* (Zakheim).

14. DoD, *Fiscal Year 2020 Budget Request*, March 2019, <https://media.defense.gov/2019/Mar/12/2002099931/-1/-1/1/FY-2020-BUDGET-ROLLOUT-BRIEF.PDF>.

15. Dov S. Zakheim, “Biden’s National Security Strategy: A Vision More Aspirational than Realistic,” *The Hill*, October 21, 2022.

16. Mike Gallagher, “Biden’s ‘Integrated Deterrence’ Fails in Ukraine,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 29, 2022; Elaine Luria, “Does the Pentagon Take China Seriously?,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 7, 2021.

17. Bryant Harris, “Congress Authorizes 8% Defense Budget Increase,” *Defense News*, December 15, 2022.

18. US Congress, *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022*, 117th Cong. (2021–2022); US Senate Committee on Armed Services, *Summary of the Fiscal Year 2023 National Defense Authorization Act*, 117th Cong. 1 (2023).

19. DoD, *2018 National Defense Strategy*, January 2018, 4, 7. (The words “budget,” “funding,” or “dollar” do not appear in the 2022 NDS.)

20. National Defense Strategy Commission, *Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission*, November 2018, xii.

21. Office of Management and Budget (OMB), “Historical Tables,” Table 5.1—Budget Authority by Function and Subfunction: 1976–2028, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/historical-tables>.

22. These calculations assume a 5 percent inflation factor for FY2022–23.

23. National Defense Strategy Commission, *Providing for the Common Defense*, xii.

24. Assuming nominal GDP of \$26.19 trillion, 4.5 percent GDP is around \$1.18 trillion, roughly \$321 billion above the FY2023 defense appropriation. International Monetary Fund, “GDP Current Prices 2023: United States,” <https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPD@WEO/USA?zoom=USA&highlight=USA> (accessed January 4, 2023); OMB, “Historical Tables,” Table 5.1; and Table 10.1—Gross Domestic Product and Deflators Used in the Historical Tables: 1940–2028, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/historical-tables>. See the comparison of 050 account to overall GDP, for yearly average of 6.13 percent GDP allocated to defense 1981–89 after 4.5 percent allocated to defense in 1980.

25. Adam O’Neal, “Russia, China and the New Cold War,” *Wall Street Journal: Weekend Interview*, March 18, 2022; Connor O’Brien, “Democrats’ Dilemma: Back Biden’s Pentagon Budget or Supersize it,” *Politico*, April 5, 2022. Elaine Luria

advocates a trillion-dollar defense budget, citing the profound strategic challenge of China and Russia.

26. Sam LaGrone, "Navy's Force Design 2045 Plans for 373 Ship Fleet, 150 Unmanned Vessels," *USNI News*, July 26, 2022.

27. DoD, *2022 Report on Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, November 2022, 145.

28. "The United States must expand its submarine fleet": See National Defense Strategy Commission, *Providing for the Common Defense*, 36; Megan Eckstein, "Workforce Development, Process Improvements Will Make or Break the Virginia-Class Submarine Program," *Defense News*, January 6, 2022.

29. Eckstein, "Workforce Development."

30. John A. Tirpak, "Air Force Would Reduce Fleet by 250 Old Aircraft, Bring On 82-Plus New Ones," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, March 28, 2022.

31. Stephen Losey, "'Deterrence the American Way': The New B-21 Bomber Debuts," *Defense News*, December 2, 2022.

32. DoD, *2018 National Defense Strategy*, 11.

33. National Defense Strategy Commission, *Providing for the Common Defense*, 41.

34. Ellen Mitchell, "Pentagon Moves \$1.45 Billion to Restock Javelin, Stinger Missiles Sent to Ukraine," *The Hill*, May 6, 2022.

35. US Senate Committee on Armed Services, *Summary of the Fiscal Year 2023 National Defense Authorization Act* (December 2022). The go-big approach is criticized for throwing money at the problem but this is exactly what solving munitions shortfalls requires. The only way to increase production capacity and the workforce are providing promises of continued demand and investment. Edward N. Luttwak, "Why We Need More Waste, Fraud, and Mismanagement in the Pentagon," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 24, no. 3 (1982): 117–30.

36. Lee Hudson, "US Looks to Shift Air Defense Systems from Middle East to Ukraine, Raytheon Chief Says," *Politico*, December 1, 2022.

37. Harry Halem and Eyck Freymann, "Ukraine Shows Why Taiwan Needs More Air Defense," *War on the Rocks*, April 7, 2022.

38. Ryan White, "The US Delays Delivery of Harpoon Coastal Defense System to Taiwan," *Naval Post*, March 9, 2021.

39. Patriot air defense systems are a scarce resource; the Pentagon must understand the cost to US modernization and training efforts. See Dan Lamothe, Karen DeYoung, and Alex Horton, "Pentagon Preparing to Send Patriot Missile System to Ukraine," *Washington Post*, December 13, 2022.

40. DoD, *2022 National Defense Strategy*, 13.

41. DoD, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller)/Chief Financial Officer, *Defense Budget Overview: Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Request*, April 2022, 3-3.

42. Dustin Walker, "Show Me the Money: Boost the Pacific Deterrence Initiative," *War on the Rocks*, June 29, 2022.



43. Walker, "Show Me the Money."

44. Walker, "Show Me the Money."

45. Michael Kofman and Anya Loukianova Fink, "Escalation Management and Nuclear Employment in Russian Military Strategy," *War on the Rocks*, September 19, 2022.

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47. Roger Zakheim, "Ukraine War Shows Us That Old Nuclear Strategies Won't Keep Us Safe and Biden Must Wake Up," *Fox News*, October 10, 2022. On congressional funding in the fiscal year 2023 NDAA, see US Senate Committee on Armed Services, *Summary of the Fiscal Year 2023 National Defense Authorization Act*. Both China and Russia are modernizing and introducing theater nuclear capabilities and we cannot rely on the threat of strategic nuclear forces and must utilize lower-yield theater nuclear capabilities of our own. See US Senate, Armed Services Committee, *United States Nuclear Strategy and Policy*, 117th Cong. 8 (2022) (statement by Eric S. Edelman, Counselor for Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, and Franklin C. Miller, Principal of the Scowcroft Group).

48. Jon Harper, "Lawmakers Want to Shrink Army, Grow Navy," *National Defense Magazine*, February 28, 2022.

49. Ethan Sterenfeld, "Army End Strength Could Fall to 445,000 in FY-23," *Inside Defense*, July 19, 2022.

50. One need only look back to Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom to see how an active-duty army force below 500,000 cannot sustain a sustained ground conflict.

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52. DoD, *2022 National Defense Strategy*, 6. "New applications of artificial intelligence, quantum science, autonomy, biotechnology, and space technologies have the potential not just to change kinetic conflict, but also to disrupt day-to-day US supply chain and logistics operations"; DoD, Under Secretary of Defense, *2023 Budget Request*, 4-5.

53. Doug Cameron and Micah Maidenburg, "Space Launches Should Withstand Chinese Challenge, Pentagon Mandate Says," *Wall Street Journal*, January 10, 2023. See new DoD requirements that new US spy satellites must be capable of fending off Chinese and Russian interference, a change from previous standards strictly concerned with cost and reliability.

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55. DoD, Under Secretary of Defense, *2023 Budget Request*, 4-2.

56. Oren Liebermann, “US Air Force Carries Out First Fully Successful Test of Air-Launched Hypersonic Missile,” CNN, December 12, 2022.

57. Eric Chewning, Will Gangware, Jess Harrington, and Dale Swartz, “How Will US Funding for Defense Technology Innovation Evolve?,” McKinsey & Company, November 4, 2022.

58. Chewning et al., “How Will US Funding for Defense Technology Innovation Evolve?”

59. DoD, *2021 Report on Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*, November 2021, 145, 147.

60. OMB, “Historical Tables,” Tables 5.1 and 10.1.

61. Ronald Reagan Institute, *Reagan National Defense Survey*, November 2022, distributed by Beacon Research and Shaw & Company Research.

62. Ronald Reagan Institute, *Reagan National Defense Survey*.

63. Ronald Reagan Institute, *Reagan National Defense Survey*.

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65. Ronald Reagan Institute, *Reagan National Defense Survey*.

66. Commission on PPBE Reform, “About Us,” <https://ppbereform.senate.gov/aboutus> (accessed April 7, 2023).

67. US Government Accountability Office, *Defense Budget: DoD Has Adopted Practices to Manage within the Constraints of Continuing Resolutions*, highlights of GAO-21-541, a report to congressional committees, September 2021. DoD has insulated itself from the harmful effects of CRs by developing spending plans for various CR scenarios and adjusting contracts to reflect CR spending availability.

68. Defense Technical Information Center, *Report of the Advisory Panel on Streamlining and Codifying Acquisition Regulations*, January 2019, 2. See reforms including that Congress should allow one year validity of all funding appropriated under CRs to eliminate budget compression effect.

69. Connor O’Brien, “GOP Senators Look to Add \$50B for Defense into Critical Infrastructure Bill,” *Politico*, August 5, 2021. See \$25.4 billion investment to upgrade Navy shipyards to support new ships and a larger fleet.

70. For a discussion on digitally enabled flexible and customizable manufacturing in the defense sector, see Ronald Reagan Institute, *A Manufacturing Renaissance: Bolstering US Production for National Security and Economic Prosperity*, Task Force on National Security and US Manufacturing Competitiveness, November 2021, 15.

71. Lloyd Austin, Luncheon Keynote Speech, and Panel 10 (Mark Esper), “Protecting Strength: A Discussion with Former National Security Leaders,” at Reagan National Defense Forum 2022: Protecting Peace, Projecting Strength (Simi Valley, CA, December 2, 2022). During his address Secretary Austin announced the creation of the Office of Strategic Capital. “This is an example of how we’re creating

the conditions for innovation for our innovators to succeed. You know this kind of change doesn't always move as smoothly or as quickly as I'd like, but we are determined to change the way that the Pentagon does business." Secretary Mark Esper expressed similar sentiments during Panel 10: "We have to accelerate the access of innovation from the private sector into DoD to capitalize on cutting edge technologies that are out there."

72. Ronald Reagan Institute, *The Contest for Innovation: Strengthening America's National Security Innovation Base in an Era of Strategic Competition*, Task Force on 21st Century National Security Technology and Workforce, December 2019. The task force's recommendations include (1) making use of its alternative acquisition pathways to award contracts as part of programs of record to companies to ensure a sustainable funding profile; (2) measuring progress in contracts awarded, total dollars awarded, and speed of procurement, focusing on writing fewer, larger checks both as a way to leverage key emerging technologies and as a signal to investors; and (3) overhauling software acquisitions to move away from requirements lists to iterative capabilities and maximize the use of commercial standards for interoperability.

73. Bill Greenwalt, "Competing in Time: How DoD Is Losing the Innovation Race to China," *Breaking Defense*, March 9, 2021; William C. Greenwalt and Dan Patt, "Competing in Time: Ensuring Capability Advantage and Mission Success through Adaptable Resource Allocation," Hudson Institute, February 25, 2021. Greenwalt and Patt find that the key to national security strategy success is managing the budgeting process, not the acquisitions process as conventional wisdom would indicate. Keeping the massive Pentagon bureaucracy churning is the critical engine for a long-term military competition. The budget process and PPBE is antiquated. The emerging technologies critical for tomorrow's battles are not resourced in the same fashion as the technology that won the Cold War. As the United States enters a new era of strategic competition, it must holistically reform PPBE to maintain a competitive advantage in long-term competition.

74. Shands Pickett, "Reboot the Defense Innovation Ecosystem," *War on the Rocks*, April 7, 2022.

75. National Defense Strategy Commission, *Providing for the Common Defense*, 52.

76. Ronald Reagan, "Address at Commencement Exercises at Eureka College," given in Eureka, IL, May 9, 1982.