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“If we falter in our leadership, we may endanger the peace of the world  
– and we shall surely endanger the welfare of this Nation.”

- President Harry S. Truman, March 12,  
1947

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The balance of power and persuasion in the world has shifted against the United States and other free and open societies. Much of that shift has been self-inflicted due to a failure to understand emerging challenges to American security, prosperity, and influence. The United States must improve its strategic competence and, in particular, its ability not only to improve understanding, but also to integrate all elements of national power and efforts of likeminded partners to accomplish defined policy goals. The effort to shift the balance in favor of the United States and likeminded liberal democracies will depend on confidence as well as competence because wars and competitions short of wars are, fundamentally, contests of will. The work of this committee is vital to building our strategic competence and our confidence as well as ensuring that our military has the capabilities it needs to deter war and, when necessary, fight to defend the American people and our way of life.

Our failures of understanding stem, in part, from overconfidence after the end of the Cold War. In 1989 I was a captain in the Second Armored Cavalry Regiment stationed in West Germany. Our regiment patrolled a stretch of the Iron Curtain that divided democracies and dictatorships. That November, the Berlin Wall fell and the Iron Curtain parted. The Soviet Union soon broke apart. We had won the Cold War without firing a shot. Just over a year later, the Gulf War required us to kick Saddam Hussein's army out of Kuwait. As an Army captain, I commanded Eagle Troop of the Second Cavalry Regiment at the Battle of 73 Easting, what some have called the last great tank battle of the 20th century. I first testified before this committee to explain the cause of our lopsided battlefield victory in a war full of lopsided victories. In my testimony, I stressed the less tangible aspects of combat power, especially training, education, and unit cohesion. In the decade that followed, however, over-confidence and over-optimism concerning the nature of the post-Cold War era led to complacency. It seemed that we forgot we had to compete in foreign affairs and in national security. We vacated critical arenas of competition based on three flawed assumptions.

- First, some believed that the arc of history guaranteed the primacy of free and open societies over authoritarian and closed societies. The expansion of liberal democracy was inevitable.

- Second, some assumed that the old rules of international relations and competition had become irrelevant. President George H.W. Bush hoped for “a new world order” — a world where the rule of law governs the conduct of nations. Great power competition was a relic of the past.
- Third, some thought that America’s unrivaled technological military prowess would allow our military to effect a “Revolution in Military Affairs” or RMA and achieve “full-spectrum dominance” over any potential enemy. Belief in the RMA grew out of a misinterpretation of our victory in the Gulf War, one that focused too much on technology and not enough on our armed forces’ qualitative advantages, the ineptitude of Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi command, and the narrowly-circumscribed *status quo ante* political objective to return Kuwait to the Kuwaitis. Many assumed that military competition was finished and that future wars would be easy.

All three assumptions were false and they were a setup for strategic shocks, frustrations, and disappointments in the first decade of the twenty-first century. From the Kim family regime in North Korea, to the theocratic dictatorship in Iran, to Vladimir Putin in Russia, to the Chinese Communist Party in China, to the Maduro regime in Venezuela, autocracy was still with us and was making a comeback.

Moreover, we forgot that there are two fundamental ways to fight: asymmetrically and stupidly. In 1991, Saddam Hussein picked stupidly. After the Gulf War enemies and rivals adopted countermeasures to evade or attack U.S. Joint Force differential advantages, accomplish objectives below the threshold of what might elicit a military response, break apart networked capabilities, evade detection, and restrict U.S. freedom of movement and action in the aerospace, cyber, and maritime domains. Jihadist terrorist groups and insurgent organizations attacked asymmetrically to bypass and mitigate America’s conventional warfare superiority. Meanwhile, a new competition was emerging with China as the People’s Liberation Army undertook one of the greatest peacetime military buildups in history, increasing defense spending over 800 percent since the mid-1990s, and extracting or stealing critical defense

technologies. A gullible United States and other nations underwrote much of the Chinese Communist Party's aspiration to establish military primacy across the Indo-Pacific region.

That gullibility and flawed assumptions about the post-Cold War period stemmed from strategic narcissism, the tendency to define challenges to national security as we would like them to be and to pay too little attention to the agency that others have over the future. We seemed to forget that war and competitions short of war are interactive; progress in armed conflict and in foreign policy is never linear. To improve our strategic competence, it is important that our nation's foreign policy, national security strategy, and national defense strategy reject a narcissistic view of the world in favor of what the historian Zachary Shore calls strategic empathy, an effort to view the challenges and opportunities we face from the perspective of others, especially our rivals, adversaries, and enemies.

Sadly, strategic narcissism is making a comeback as some advocate for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from overseas operations critical to our security, disengagement from military alliances, and an overall reduction of U.S. military presence abroad. Advocates of retrenchment argue that bringing the troops home would not only reduce costs, but also improve American security. The bywords for retrenchers are restraint and offshore balancing. But the argument for retrenchment is an archetype of strategic narcissism because it disregards the authorship that others have over our future. For retrenchers, other states have no agency or aspirations of their own.

The most adamant advocates of disengagement believe that the United States is the principal cause of the world's problems. Because our presence abroad creates enemies, they argue, our absence would restore harmony. The United States, therefore, is to blame for antagonizing Russia and China. America, they believe, even causes jihadist terrorism because our presence in predominantly Muslim countries generates a natural backlash. The United States drives nuclear proliferation, they feel, because states like Iran and North Korea need those weapons to defend against an overly aggressive United States. But the historical record makes clear that American behavior did not cause Russian and Chinese aggression, jihadist

terrorism, or the hostility of Iran and North Korea. Nor would disengagement solve any of those challenges.

But calls to retrench are growing louder as America struggles to overcome traumas at home including a pandemic; a recession associated with the pandemic; social division and violence sparked by George Floyd’s murder and anger over unequal treatment under the law; and vitriolic partisanship combined with lies, disinformation and conspiracy theories that culminated in the murderous assault on the Capitol on January 6, 2021. While it is clear that introspection, including an effort to clarify what it is about our republic that is worth defending – such as individual liberty, the rule of law, freedom of expression, democratic governance, tolerance, and opportunity for all – need not be combined with disengagement from challenges and opportunities abroad. Our experience with the pandemic should reinforce the lesson of the terrorist attacks of 9-11 two decades ago: dangers to our security that originate abroad can only be overcome at an exorbitant cost once they reach our shores.

We should reject narcissistic tendencies, adopt a reasoned approach to foreign policy based on strategic empathy, and sustain national security and defense strategies that acknowledge the agency that rivals, adversaries, and enemies exercise over the future.

### **Turning What the Chinese Communist Party Perceives as Weakness into Strength**

For too long the United States clung to the assumption that China, having been welcomed into the international system based on our desire for cooperation and engagement, would play by the rules and, as China prospered, its leaders would liberalize its economy and its form of governance. The 2017 National Security Strategy and the Indo-Pacific Strategy administered a corrective to that false assumption, recognized the need for transparent competition with the Chinese Communist Party’s aggressive policies, and effected what may be the most significant shift in U.S. foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. If any doubts lingered concerning the Chinese Communist Party’s intention to extend and tighten its exclusive grip on power internally and achieve “national rejuvenation” at the expense of other nations externally, the CCP’s actions in the midst of a global pandemic should have removed them. CCP leaders continued to speak

the language of cooperation and global governance while repressing human freedom, exporting their authoritarian-mercantilist model and subverting international organizations. Chairman Xi speaks of 'rule of law' while he interns millions of people in concentration camps and wages a campaign of cultural genocide against the Uighur population in Xinjiang. He vows carbon neutrality by 2060 while China continues to build scores of coal-fired plants globally per year. He gives speeches on free trade while engaging in economic aggression, forced labor, economic coercion, and unfair trade and economic practices. He suggests a "community of common destiny" while fostering servile relationships with countries vulnerable to his military or economic intimidation. The Chinese Communist Party's Orwellian reversal of the truth matters to Americans because the CCP is not only strengthening an internal system that stifles human freedom and extends its authoritarian control; it is also exporting that model and advocating for the development of new rules and a new international order that would make the world less free, less prosperous, and less safe.

Despite an undeniable record of aggression and the dangers that the CCP poses for international security and prosperity, some continue to call for warmer relations with China as an end in itself. Although more countries such as the United Kingdom, Sweden, and India have joined the United States and Australia in specific defensive measures such as banning the Chinese telecommunications company Huawei from developing fifth generation (5G) communications networks, others appear unconvinced that it is dangerous to surrender their data to the CCP. Some seem reluctant to ask even the most basic questions such as: is it realistic to expect the CCP to treat their citizens better than it treats the Chinese people? As the United States declared the CCP's attacks on Uighurs a genocide, the European Union agreed in principle to a Comprehensive Agreement on Investments with China that diverted attention away from CCP atrocities in exchange for vague promises to adhere to international standards it has consistently ignored since gaining admission to the World Trade Organization in 2001.

Although the Biden Administration did not remove Trump Administration-imposed tariffs, it re-entered international organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Human Rights Council without demanding conditions that might have made it more difficult

for the CCP to subvert those organizations. The U.S. government acted to prevent investment in Chinese companies connected to the Peoples Liberation Army, but Wall Street and other international investors are pouring money into Chinese equities undaunted by the CCP's increasing intervention in the private sector (the eleventh-hour postponement of the massive Ant Corporation initial public offering is a case in point) or the basic fact that the companies in which they are investing must, by law, act as an extension of the Party. CCP leaders are likely thinking of the quotation attributed to Vladimir Lenin as they watch China overtake the United States as the top destination for new foreign direct investment: "the capitalists will sell us the rope with which we will hang them."

Two fundamental misunderstandings about the nature of the high-stakes competition with China have stunted the collective response. It is vital that U.S. diplomatic efforts correct those misunderstandings because the Party uses them to discourage collective action necessary to defend against Chinese aggression and as cover for a sophisticated campaign of cooption, coercion and concealment.

The first misunderstanding is that Chinese aggression is the result of U.S.-China tensions or is in reaction to the Trump Administration's description of China as a rival in the December 2017 National Security Strategy and the Defense Strategy that stemmed from it. This misunderstanding derives from strategic narcissism and the conceit that the CCP has no volition except in reaction to the United States. But even the most cursory survey of recent actions reveals starkly that the United States did not cause CCP aggression and that China's promotion of its authoritarian mercantilist model poses a threat to international security and prosperity. Consider the CCP's deliberate suppression of information about the Covid-19 outbreak, the persecution of doctors and journalists who tried to warn the world, and the subversion of the WHO as it excluded Taiwan from that organization and stifled Taiwan's instructive example of how to contain the virus. The CCP has added insult to injury with 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy to obscure China's responsibility for the pandemic and portray its response as superior and magnanimous. The CCP directed massive cyberattacks globally on medical research facilities in the midst of the pandemic. In an effort to 'kill one to warn one hundred,' China inflicted

economic punishment on Australia for having the temerity to propose an inquiry into the origins of the virus. Meanwhile, the CCP raced to perfect its technologically-enabled police state and extend its repression into Hong Kong. Xi Jinping even boasted of his intention to expand concentration camps in Xinjiang and extolled the virtues of slave labor. As the CCP expelled more international reporters and imprisoned more Hong Kong rights activists, Xi Jinping announced unabashedly that he would continue to use hostage taking, such as the unlawful jailing of Canadians Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig, to coerce others to submit to Chinese demands and support the CCP's world view and violent self-conception as a one party nation with no room for ethnic plurality except on its own rigid terms. Meanwhile, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) bludgeoned Indian soldiers to death along the Himalayan frontier, rammed vessels in the South China Sea, gave its Coast Guard permission to fire on vessels that do not recognize its baseless claims of control over that strategic maritime area, threatened Japan's Senkakus, and menaced Taiwan with its aircraft and naval vessels. It is past time to jettison the narcissistic belief that the United States caused CCP aggression and recognize the Party's actions as manifestations of its leaders' fears, aspirations, and ideology. President Biden and his diplomats might make clear to their counterparts abroad that the choice they face is *not* one between Washington and Beijing. The choice is between sovereignty and servitude.

The second misunderstanding is that competition with China is dangerous or even irresponsible because of a Thucydides Trap, a term coined to express the likelihood of conflict between a rising power (China) and a *status quo* power (the United States). The CCP promotes the false dilemma associated with the Thucydides Trap to portray efforts to defend against its aggression as simply the United States trying to keep China and its people down. But the way to avoid stepping into the trap of destructive war is to neither gravitate toward confrontation nor passive accommodation. Transparent competition as described in the recently-declassified Indo-Pacific Strategy is the best way to prevent unnecessary escalation and enable rather than foreclose on cooperation with China. The Thucydides Trap trope provides cover for the CCP's aggression, as well as rationalization for those who prefer passive accommodation to



competition as they pursue short-term profits and sell to the CCP the rope with which they hope to hang us.

If our diplomats correct those misunderstandings and we resolve to compete alongside likeminded partners, it is possible to turn what the CCP views as our weaknesses (such as democratic governance, freedom of speech, and rule of law) into our greatest competitive advantages. Competing might also generate confidence in those principles that distinguish our free and open societies from the closed, authoritarian system China is promoting. That is why assistance to those abroad engaged in the promotion of what we regard as unalienable rights and the strengthening of institutions vital to representative governance is not just an exercise in altruism; it is one of the best ways to counter the CCP's ambitious strategic aims.

There is much room for improvement in the effort to prevent China from using the open nature of free market economies to gain technological advantage, perfect its surveillance police state, and promote its authoritarian capitalist model. The integrated nature of the Chinese Communist Party's military and economic strategies is what makes it particularly dangerous to the United States and other free and open societies. For example, many universities, research labs, and companies in countries that value the rule of law and individual rights are unwitting accomplices in the CCP's use of technology to repress its people and improve PLA capabilities. What is needed is an international commitment to do no harm through research, investment, trade, or other economic relationships with Chinese companies that must act as extensions of the CCP in three areas.

- First, do not engage in trade or investment relationships that transfer sensitive technology and allow the PLA and the CCP to gain a differential advantage militarily or an unfair advantage in the emerging data-driven global economy.
- Second, do not invest in Chinese companies or do business in China in a way that helps the CCP stifle human freedom and perfect its technologically-enabled police state.

- And finally, do not transfer intellectual property and compromise the long-term viability of companies in exchange for short-term profits associated with access to the Chinese market.

The U.S. government will continue to play an important role in this competition, but companies and shareholders must recognize what is at stake and make decisions consistent with long-term interests. Additional measures would help companies insulate themselves from the coercive power of the CCP. For example, fast-tracking visas for Chinese employees of U.S. companies and their families if they are the object of CCP coercion would help companies stand up to the CCP while protecting their people.

Improvements in the review process for Chinese investment in U.S. companies should be matched by tougher screening for Chinese firms listed on U.S., European, and Japanese capital markets as well as scrutiny of U.S. investment in Chinese companies. Many Chinese companies directly or indirectly involved in domestic human rights abuses, development of advanced defense capabilities and violation of international treaties are listed on American stock exchanges or benefit from U.S. investment while failing to meet transparency and reporting requirements.

We must continue to expand on the important work that the intelligence agencies and Departments of State, Defense and Justice have done to counter the CCP's sustained campaign of industrial espionage while recognizing that defensive measures will prove inadequate. Prevailing in the tech competition will require more investment in basic and applied research as well as stronger cooperation across the public and private sectors of likeminded liberal democracies. For important emerging technologies such as those associated with quantum computing or artificial intelligence, the private sector should seek new partnerships with countries who share commitments to the free market, representative government, and the rule of law.

Other arenas of competition that require a high degree of international cooperation include China's effort to control critical supply chains, financial technology, digital currency and electronic payments, and global internet privacy and data standards. The CCP's effort to gain

preponderant influence over global logistics infrastructure through strategic investments and debt traps as well as subsidies for fifth generation (5G) communications infrastructure require multi-national cooperation and economic statecraft. Governments of free market economies must work together and within international organizations to ensure access to critical commodities and products such as rare earth metals and computer chips, enforce reciprocal trade practices, and demand recompense for China's unfair advantages such as state support for companies like the telecommunications company, Huawei. The actions that Congress is taking in these areas is reassuring and this committee should encourage the Biden Administration to build on the work that Under Secretary of State for Growth, Energy and the Environment Keith Krach did on a comprehensive strategy for securing America's competitive economic and technological advantages.

Transparent competition with China requires a strong defense to convince the CCP and the PLA that they cannot accomplish objectives in the Indo-Pacific region through the use of force. China is using its growing military capability and capacity to intimidate countries and restrict access for U.S. forces. It has already embarked on efforts to push American forces out as the first step in establishing hegemonic influence across the Indo-Pacific region analogous to the tributary system of the Qing Dynasty. The 2018 National Defense Strategy identified eight critical areas for modernization that remain valid and relevant. Those priorities require sustained, predictable investment. Perhaps most important, it is difficult to overstate the need for forward-positioned joint forces to assure allies and deter adversaries. Both China and Russia have developed anti-access and area denial (A2AD) capabilities to restrict U.S. and allied freedom of movement and action. Forward positioned, capable joint forces of sufficient size transform what adversaries would like to declare denied space into contested space while ensuring that, if conflict should occur, we do not have to pay the high price of readmission.

Competition does not foreclose on cooperation. If the United States and likeminded liberal democracies convince Chinese leaders that their campaign of cooption, coercion and concealment is not working, they may conclude that they can have enough of their dream without doing so at the expense of their peoples' rights or the security, sovereignty, and prosperity of other nations' citizens. But it will be important to avoid making compromises

with the CCP based on false promises of cooperation in areas such as climate change or North Korea's nuclear program. Watching what the CCP does rather than believing what it says is a best practice.

### **Parrying Putin's Playbook**

For two decades, strategic narcissism blinded those who were hopeful about warm relations with Russia because they failed to consider the ideology, emotions, and aspirations that drove and constrained Putin's strategy toward the United States and Europe. Since he ascended to power at the turn of the century, Putin's goal has been to return Russia to great power status. But with a declining population, dwindling influence, and a weak economy, Russia cannot compete directly with the United States and our allies in Europe. So Putin adopted a strategy to drag others down to Russia's level by sowing division, weakening rival states, and unraveling alliances. Foundational to that strategy are disinformation campaigns designed to destroy trust in democratic principles, institutions, and processes.

Russian disinformation campaigns use cyber-enabled information warfare to shake citizens' belief in their common identity. They manipulate social media and create false stories and personas. These campaigns attempt to widen divisions on political issues related to race, immigration, and gun control and to reduce Americans' confidence in our democratic principles, institutions and processes. The objective is to incite fear and anger on both the far right and the far left in a way that leaves the American people polarized and pitted against one another. Russian agents care little about the outcome of elections; they mainly want to ensure that large numbers of Americans doubt the legitimacy of the results. Russian agents also want to discredit legitimate news sources so that Americans are less able to distinguish between falsehood and reality. When confronted with their falsehoods and evidence of their aggression, Russian leaders make blatantly false statements and adamant denials. This implausible deniability allows Russian leaders sometimes to literally get away with murder and fosters a sense of helplessness and anxiety concerning what the Kremlin might do next to target free and open societies.

So how should we defend against Russia's sophisticated form of aggression? Because Putin's playbook includes cyber-attacks such as the Solarwinds hack as well as a sustained campaign of cyber-enabled information warfare, defending forward in cyberspace to identify and act against the source of attacks is essential. Exposing the Kremlin's efforts to sow dissension within nations and among them is also important. Truth is the best antidote to falsehood. Putin and those around him are sensitive to the truth because of their corruption and abuse of power. Supporting those who give voice to the truth such as Russian opposition groups, anti-corruption organizations, and investigative journalists holds promise for gaining the initiative against Putin and his inner circle. But there is also much to do at home. Political leaders must stop aiding and abetting the Kremlin and resist the temptation to compromise principle by either refusing to acknowledge Russian subversion or reinforcing false narratives in efforts to gain partisan political advantage.

Deterring Russian aggression and parrying Putin's playbook in cyberspace and in the physical world also entails imposing costs on the Kremlin that exceed what Russian leaders thought they would face in retaliation for attacking or undermining our vital interests. Our allies could do more. For example, Germany's cancellation of NORDSTREAM II would not only deny Moscow coercive power over Berlin, but could deter the Kremlin from intensifying its sustained campaign of political subversion or committing more egregious attacks like attempted assassinations using banned nerve agents.

Of course, it seems unlikely that these measures would convince Putin to give up his goal to restore Russia to relative greatness at others' expense. America might strengthen its defense through education to alert citizens of the dangers associated with disinformation, encourage the professional media to reestablish journalistic standards, and find ways to reduce the polarizing effect of social media without stifling freedom of expression. A restoration of civility in civil and political discourse would diminish fissures in our society that the Kremlin is eager to exploit. And stronger relationships between America and our allies might convince President Putin that he cannot drag us down by sowing division. In particular, our European friends might speak less about strategic autonomy and more about strengthening the transatlantic alliance.

The military component of Putin's effort to restore Russia to greatness includes the use of disruptive technologies and mercenaries under the concept of New Generation Warfare. Russian campaigns employ combinations of conventional and unconventional forces to accomplish objectives below the threshold of what might elicit a concerted military response from the United States and NATO. Conventional capabilities such as long range missiles, tiered air defense, drones, offensive cyber, and electronic warfare are designed to counter U.S. and NATO advantages while novel nuclear weapons are meant to support the dangerous doctrine of escalation domination under which Russia would threaten or use a nuclear strike to compel negotiation on its own terms. Modernization of the nuclear triad as called for in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review as well as the maintenance of capable forward positioned joint forces in Europe will remain essential components of deterring Russian aggression. But competing with Russia in what some now call "grey-zone" conflict should be top on the agenda of the NATO alliance.

While developing the range of capabilities needed to deter Russian aggression, America should take a long view on its relationship with Moscow. Despite changes to the constitution that could leave him in power until 2036, Vladimir Putin will not be in charge forever. Russians may be growing weary of him, especially after the COVID-19 crisis, the recession, the collapse of oil prices, and the continued weight of economic sanctions imposed after the 2014 annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine. Recently, the attempted murder and subsequent imprisonment of Putin's most vocal political opponent, Alexei Navalny, galvanized popular protests. It is important to foster relationships with Russians outside of Putin's inner circle so they know that, under responsible leadership, Russia would once again be welcomed into the Euro-Atlantic community.

### **Forcing Iran's Theocratic Dictatorship to Make a Choice**

For decades, American policies toward Iran have produced disappointing results in part due to a lack of appreciation for the ideology that drives Iran's theocratic dictatorship. Conciliatory approaches toward Iran across multiple administrations have suffered from a lack

strategic empathy. The Iranian nuclear deal, adopted in 2015, is a recent example. President Obama had hoped that relaxing sanctions would convince Iran not only to give up its nuclear program, but also to focus “more on the economy and its people.” His administration, like other administrations, hoped that if the Islamic Republic were welcomed into the international community, it would halt its four-decade long proxy war and eventually evolve into a force for stability in the Middle East. The belief that sanctions relief would change not only the behavior but also the very nature of the regime was based on the narcissistic assumption that U.S. actions are the principal source of Iranian attitudes and behaviors.

When it comes to understanding Iranian behavior, there are two factors to keep in mind. First, since 1979, the regime has been driven mainly by the ideology of the revolution, an ideology that is fundamentally hostile to the United States and liberal ideals. And second, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the military organization charged with preserving the revolution, want hegemonic influence in the Middle East. Accomplishing that goal requires driving the United States out of the region. Consider a short highlight reel from Iran’s proxy war against the United States to do just that.

- In 1979, revolutionaries in Tehran storm the U.S. embassy and hold 52 Americans hostage for 444 days.
- In October 1983 in Lebanon, Iranian trained terrorists kill 241 servicemen in a Marine barracks. Six months earlier, a truck bombing of the U.S. embassy killed 63 people including 17 Americans.
- In 1996, Iranian-backed Hezbollah detonates a truck bomb outside Khobar Tower in Saudi Arabia, killing 19 American Airmen.
- And beginning in 2004 in Iraq, Iranian backed militias kill over 600 American soldiers with bombs made in Iran and attack the US embassy in Baghdad.

The regime’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps gets away with murder due not only to its use of proxies, but also the belief across multiple U.S. administrations that the Iranian regime would respond positively to a conciliatory approach.

But when Iran *has* moderated its behavior, it did so only in response to intense political, economic, and military pressure. Just three highlights.

- Late in the 1980s when it is in shambles from the Iran-Iraq War, Iran releases all U.S. hostages.
- In 2013 under pressure from sanctions, cyberattacks, covert action, and the prospect of a military strike, the regime agrees to nuclear talks.
- In January 2020 a U.S. strike kills IRGC Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad. Iran's retaliation is muted and proxy attacks diminish. Subsequently unrest spreads throughout Iran due to popular discontent and the IRGC accidentally shooting down of a civilian airliner.

A conciliatory approach does not succeed with Iran. The Biden Administration should work with likeminded partners in four areas to force the Iranian regime to choose between continuing their murderous proxy wars or behaving like a responsible nation.

- First, improve defenses against Iranian military and terrorist capabilities.
- Second, impose physical and financial costs on Iran, to reduce resources available to wage its proxy wars across the Middle East.
- Third, disrupt Iran's path to a nuclear weapon, through diplomatic, economic, and if necessary other efforts.
- Fourth, circumvent the regime's firewalls to communicate with the Iranian people, expose the regime's corruption, and reinforce already strong popular sentiment for a change in the nature of a dictatorship that steals and squanders the nation's wealth while denying people fundamental rights.

There is much that America and its partners can do to force the Iranian regime to choose between economic ruin or ceasing its aggression abroad and its hostility to its own people. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's statements have been wise, especially in connecting any effort to reach an improved nuclear deal to Iran's development of other destructive weapons such as long range missiles as well as its destructive proxy wars across the Middle East.



Until the Iranian regime ceases its permanent hostility to the United States and Israel, the U.S. military must be prepared to deter and defend against Iranian aggression. At the end of 2019, Iranian proxies killed a U.S. citizen in Iraq and Iranian agents orchestrated an assault on the US embassy in Baghdad. Meanwhile, Qassem Soleimani traveled the region to plan further attacks against U.S. citizens and interests. On New Year's Day 2020, Ayatollah Khamenei taunted American leaders, saying "you cannot do anything." He was wrong. And in February 2021, after Iranian proxies in Iraq conducted deadly rocket attacks on U.S. embassy and two bases that housed American troops and contractors, the Biden Administration ordered a retaliatory strike against an Iranian proxy position along the Iraq-Syria border. Deterring Iran from continuing and intensifying its four-decade-long proxy war requires informing Iran's leaders that regardless of how Iran delivers attacks on American citizens or interests in the region, Washington understands the return address.

### **Reversing Self-defeat in Afghanistan**

The costs of strategic narcissism were high in the wars that followed the mass murder attacks of September 11, 2001. At the outset of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the orthodoxy of the RMA encouraged a short-term approach to long-term challenges. That short-term approach and, in particular, the initial failure to recognize the need for military operations to contribute to the consolidation of initial military gains and help achieve a political outcome consistent with wartime goals and objectives, increased the cost and length of both conflicts. Although it was appropriate for the 2018 National Defense Strategy to recognize the return of great power competition and the associated need to address a bow wave of deferred modernization, some have succumbed to the temptation to, once again, define the problem of future war as we would prefer it to be. If we allow a new version of the RMA orthodoxy to emerge from our desire to leave behind the painful experiences of the long, frustrating wars in South Asia and the Middle East, we will also leave behind the hard-won lessons of those wars and doom ourselves to pay the price for relearning them yet again.

In Afghanistan and Iraq, strategic narcissism resulted in absurd practices such as declaring years in advance the precise numbers of troops deployed and the restrictions under which they would operate, announcing troop withdrawal timelines, removing authorities necessary to fight effectively, and negotiating with an enemy to whom we have already made known our intention to capitulate. The reference is, of course, to the Taliban, an organization determined to reestablish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and an organization that remains intertwined with other jihadist terrorist organizations, including Al Qaeda. The self-delusion that the Taliban has in some way become less murderous and is disconnected from other terrorist organizations represents a grand self-delusion driven by a forlorn effort to justify an incompetent and unethical policy.

The negotiated agreement with the Taliban is based on the same narcissistic assumption that underpinned the complete withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011: that wars end when we decide to disengage. Except the negotiated withdrawal from Afghanistan is worse because concessions made, including failing to demand a cease fire and forcing the Afghan government to release five thousand terrorists from prison, have weakened the Afghan government on the way out. The prioritization of withdrawal is tantamount to self-defeat and jeopardizes the objective that impelled our intervention in Afghanistan in 2001: deny jihadist terrorists a safe haven and support base to plan, prepare and resource mass murder attacks against the United States and our allies.

If we continue to adhere to the weak agreement that the Taliban is violating already, it is likely that our armed forces will have to return to Afghanistan and pay a much higher price than if we had sustained our support for Afghan security forces who are bearing the brunt of the fight against jihadist terrorists as part of an international coalition in which U.S. troops number less than those of our coalition partners. We should learn from how the release of Al Qaeda prisoners in Iraq combined with U.S. military and diplomatic disengagement there set conditions for the rise of ISIS. U.S. forces then returned to support a four-year campaign to end a humanitarian catastrophe and wrest territory the size of Britain from what had become the world's most destructive terrorist organization.

America's frustrations and disappointments over its long, costly war in Afghanistan are understandable. The desire for a quick victory in Afghanistan impelled a very successful initial military campaign that unseated the Taliban government. But America's short-term mentality led to a neglect of tasks critical to achieving a sustainable political outcome and rendering the Taliban and other terrorist organizations in the region incapable of again committing mass murder on the scale of 9-11. Soon after the Taliban fled the Afghan capital of Kabul, America's attention turned to the war in Iraq. As what was supposed to be another short war there morphed into a protracted counterinsurgency campaign, the Taliban regenerated in Pakistan with the help of Al Qaeda and the Pakistan Army's notorious intelligence arm, the Inter-Services Intelligence or ISI. In 2009, the Barack Obama Administration, coping with a financial crisis and sensitive to growing American impatience with the war, prioritized the departure of U.S. troops over what was necessary to achieve a sustainable outcome consistent with U.S. interests.

The administration succumbed to strategic narcissism as it separated the Taliban from Al Qaeda and doubled down on efforts to cooperate with Pakistan while limiting support for Afghan forces fighting the Taliban. That strategic mistake resulted in a narrow focus to defeat Al Qaeda in Pakistan and negotiate with, rather than fight against, the Taliban.

American leaders across several administrations failed to apply strategic empathy to Pakistan. It is true that if security in Pakistan collapsed or if Pakistan became completely estranged from the West, the jihadist terrorist threat to the region and the world could increase dramatically. And an isolated, desperate Pakistan might initiate another war with India, a war that could lead to nuclear devastation in one of the world's most populous regions. But the U.S. approach to Pakistan since 9-11 often assumed that the Pakistani Army and the ISI would, in exchange for U.S. economic and military assistance, reduce support for and ultimately act against the Taliban and other terrorist networks based inside Pakistan. U.S. leaders underestimated the degree to which the Pakistani Army's obsessive fear of India drives Islamabad's foreign policy. Pakistan's generals support the Taliban and other terrorist organizations because they want to control at least portions of Afghanistan to provide the

“strategic depth” essential, in their minds, to prevent India from encircling them with an Afghan government friendly to New Delhi.

Today, Afghan leaders are attempting to follow up on a peace agreement that the Donald Trump administration signed with the Taliban on February 29 2020 in Doha, Qatar. But the agreement abandoned a fundamentally sound and sustainable South Asia strategy adopted in August 2017 and doubled down on the flaws of the Obama Administration’s Afghan policy. It abandoned a long-term approach in favor of satisfying the desire to disengage from the war. As the U.S. continues its withdrawal and inter-Afghan dialogue makes no progress, the Taliban has intensified attacks against Afghan security forces and civilians. A massive assassination campaign is ongoing across the country targeting journalists, judges, civil society leaders, and politicians committed to preserving the freedoms Afghans have enjoyed since the end of brutal Taliban rule in 2001.

America and its coalition partners in Afghanistan need a consistent, sustainable long-term strategy based on what the situation demands and what the American people will support rather than wishful thinking. That strategy should be grounded in four realities.

- First, counter terrorism operations from “over the horizon” will be ineffective if security collapses in Afghanistan. Afghan soldiers are bearing the brunt of the fight against the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and other terrorist organizations. Afghan security forces and the Afghan state should be strengthened to cope with the regenerative capacity of the Taliban.
- Second, the Taliban is intertwined with other terrorist groups. Multinational efforts should focus on dismantling the terrorist ecosystem in South Asia. Because the Taliban is part of that ecosystem, it is unlikely to separate from it.
- Pakistan will not end or dramatically reduce its support for the Taliban or other jihadist terrorist groups unless the costs of continued support for terrorists become too great. The U.S. and other nations must convince Pakistani leaders that it is in their best interest to pursue diplomacy rather than use terrorists to advance their foreign policy.

- Afghanistan will require international support for the foreseeable future. Afghanistan will not and does not need to become Denmark. If the United States continues to share the burden with other coalition partners, that support can incentivize reform, get the country on the slow path to self-sufficiency, and do so at an acceptable cost as Afghans continue to bear the brunt of their fight to secure a future of peace and security.

If the Biden Administration abandons the weak agreement that the Taliban have already broken, it is possible to reverse a self-defeating strategy and sustain a long-term effort at a cost acceptable to the American people. And Americans might remind those who continue to argue for capitulation of G.K. Chesterton's observation that war is not the best way of settling differences, but it may be the only way to ensure that they are not settled for you.

### **Prioritizing U.S. Interests in the Middle East**

The Biden Administration faces a confounding and wretched situation in the greater Middle East (the region spanning Morocco in the west to Iran in the east and encompassing the northern countries of Syria and Iraq to the southern countries of Sudan and Yemen). Over the past two decades, the inability of the United States to pursue a consistent policy in cooperation with like-minded nations contributed to the scale and duration of the catastrophe there and diminished American influence. The policies of recent Administrations were consistent with America's tendency since World War II to engage the region episodically and pursue short-term solutions to long-term problems. Many Americans view the region mainly as a mess to be avoided. But there are three reasons why disengagement would make a bad situation worse with implications for Americans as well as the peoples of the region.

- First, problems in the region do not remain confined there. Jihadist terrorist organizations are orders of magnitude larger than the mujahedeen alumni from the Soviet-Afghan War; their reach and destructive capabilities are growing.
- Second, the costs of inaction in the region are often higher than the costs of action. The George W. Bush administration's 2003 invasion of Iraq may have been ill-considered, but so was the Barack Obama Administration's withdrawal from Iraq in 2011. Many

disremember how the Obama Administration's effort to avoid what it perceived as its predecessor's mistakes in Iraq surpassed them with a NATO campaign that contributed to Muammar Khadafy's demise, but did nothing to shape the political environment that followed. It is clear that the decision in 2013 not to enforce a previously-announced "red line" in Syria (after the Assad regime used chemical weapons to murder nearly 1,400 people, including 426 children) removed remaining checks on the regime's brutality and emboldened the Assad regime's sponsors, Russia and Iran. The worst humanitarian crisis since World War II overburdened neighboring states of Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey and extended into Europe.

- Third, the Middle East has always been and will remain an arena for competitions that have consequences far beyond its geographic expanse. Some argue that the United States should disengage to free up assets for great power competition with Russia and China, but competitions with those countries are ongoing in the region. For example, Russia and Iran aid, abet, and sustain the murderous Assad regime in Syria. Russia uses the crisis in the region as a way to weaken Europe and present the Kremlin as the arbiter of a conflict that it is perpetuating. Iran uses chaos to its strategic advantage. Tehran's strategy is to keep the Arab world enmeshed in sectarian conflict while its proxies extend Iranian influence to the Mediterranean Sea, Red Sea, and the borders of Israel.

While recognizing the limits of its influence in the region, the United States should galvanize a long-term multi-national diplomatic, military and development effort to arrest the cycle of sectarian violence that is strengthening terrorist organizations, extending Iran's influence, perpetuating state weakness, and inflicting human suffering on a colossal scale. Diplomatic efforts should pursue resolution of the civil wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen consistent with the U.N. political process; curtail Iranian influence in the region; and galvanize assistance for refugees and international funding for reconstruction. Long-term diplomatic engagement is necessary to strengthen groups that can contribute to enduring political settlements; forge accommodations across sectarian, ethnic and tribal divides; combat extremist ideology; resist Iranian subversion; and undertake the range of intelligence, law enforcement, and military

efforts necessary to prevent terrorists from threatening the United States and interests abroad. Diplomacy should encourage likeminded partners to impose costs on Tehran and Moscow for perpetuating violence and insecurity. For example, it is difficult to imagine how Turkish leaders could continue cooperation with Russia and Iran after the losses of Turkish soldiers in Syria and the clash of Russian and Turkish proxy forces in Libya.

Diplomatic efforts should focus on arresting the centripetal forces that are perpetuating violence and preventing political resolution of conflicts. Military support for that political objective includes small U.S. forces to enable partners to combat terrorists and counter Iranian proxies. Beyond sustained efforts to deny jihadist terrorists bases of operation, U.S. forces, alongside partners in the region, must remain prepared to impose costs on Iran should its leaders intensify its four-decade-long proxy war to drive the United States out of the region, threaten Israel, and keep the Arab world in perpetual conflict. Long-term development efforts should encourage reforms that strengthen governance, rule of law, and democratic institutions and processes.

The breakdown of order in the Middle East is, in large measure, the result of serial failures of colonial rule, post-colonial monarchies, Arab nationalism, socialist dictatorships, and Islamist extremism. Decades of conflict fragmented societies along ethnic, sectarian, and tribal lines. From Beirut to Baghdad to Tehran, people are demanding reform. The United States and other nations should support them. Governments responsive to the demands of their people are able to counter corruption and remove significant barriers to the economic growth that is necessary to recover from the Covid-19 recession and provide jobs in a region that has possessed the highest youth unemployment rate for the past twenty-five years.

There are no short-term solutions to the Middle East's long-term problems. Progress in breaking the cycle of sectarian violence and overcoming the region's problems will be slow and uneven. There will be setbacks. The halting progress and frequent disappointments in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process across the past three decades is a case in point. So is the complicity of the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, a person some thought to be a reformer, in the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a journalist and U.S. resident. But there have also been recent

successes that should be exploited and gains that should be sustained. For example, the Abraham Accords resulted in normalization of relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco holds promise for countering Iran's proxy wars against Israel and the Arab monarchies as well as separating jihadist terrorists from sources of ideological support. Lebanon is in free fall, but the financial and economic crisis might have galvanized a popular movement to remove its corrupt ruling class and limit the influence of Iran's proxy, Hezbollah. Iraq remains in crisis, but its leaders have proven resistant to Iranian efforts to align the country with its destructive agenda. The horrible crisis in Yemen continues, but there is no end in sight without U.S. diplomatic efforts and the prospect of U.S. military action should the Iranian-backed Houthis continue their murderous offensive and perpetuate threats against the UAE, Saudi Arabia and shipping in the strategic Bab al Mandeb strait. When pursuing diplomatic objectives in the Middle East, we would do well to remember former Secretary of State George Shultz's observation that "negotiation is a euphemism for capitulation unless the shadow of power is cast across the negotiating table."

U.S. disengagement from the Middle East would neither conciliate the region's violent passions nor insulate America from them. A long-term strategy that prioritizes U.S. interests and integrates diplomatic, military and development efforts to break the cycle of sectarian violence in the region while incentivizing necessary reforms is the best way to improve America's security as well as the security of the long-suffering people of the Middle East.

### **Making the North Korean Regime Safer Without the Most Destructive Weapons on Earth**

A nuclear-armed North Korea would threaten both regional stability and the global nonproliferation regime. It is likely that North Korea would engage in nuclear blackmail and attempt to force the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the peninsula as the first step in accomplishing the Kim family dictatorship's goal of "red colored unification." Multiple diplomatic efforts to ensure that the North Korean regime did not pose a grave threat to the world have resulted in failure and disappointment. Those efforts failed, in part, because they were based on one of two flawed assumptions about the North Korean regime under Kim Il-



sung until his death in 1994, his son Kim Jung-Il until his death in 2011, and his grandson Kim Jung-Un.

- First, a forlorn hope that opening up to North Korea would change the nature of the regime. This is sometimes called the “Sunshine Policy.” But while the Kim family was happy to accept payoffs in exchange for limited opening, once it pocketed the money, it slammed the door shut lest the North Korean people gain access to information other than the systematic propaganda and brainwashing to which they are subjected.
- Second, the belief that the Kim family regime was unsustainable and that what many referred to as the “hermit kingdom” would collapse before it developed and fielded nuclear weapons and long range missiles. But while the North Korean people suffered tremendous deprivation, the regime turned deprivation into a virtue associated with self-reliance under its convoluted, but effective *juche* ideology.

If North Korea’s ultimate goal is a “final victory,” defined by a unified Korea, acknowledging North Korea as a limited nuclear power and pursuing a strategy of containment is not acceptable. It is important to remember that North Korea has never developed a weapon that it did not try to sell, including the sale of its nuclear technology to Syria before an Israeli Defense Force airstrike destroyed a secret nuclear facility there in 2007.

After rejecting the flawed assumptions that underpinned previous policy and considering the purpose behind Kim Jong-Un’s pursuit of nuclear weapons and long range missiles, it seems clear that U.S. strategy should be to sustain international support behind a strategy of maximum pressure to test the thesis that Kim Jong-Un can be convinced that his regime is safer *without* nuclear weapons than it is with them.

U.S. and allied leaders should make it clear that the removal of the Kim regime is not a goal of U.S. policy, unless Kim refuses to denuclearize. The United States and likeminded nations should base the strategy of maximum pressure on three principles.

- First, not to accede to initial agreements and payoffs just to get to the negotiating table. Previous “freeze for freeze” agreements that relaxed sanctions in exchange for a suspension of nuclear and missile tests locked in the

status quo as the new normal and initiated long, frustrating negotiations that concluded with a weak agreement. After collecting the payoff, the North Korean regime broke the agreement and restarted the cycle with new provocations. To avoid the pattern of previous failed efforts, it is vital to resist the temptation to lift sanctions prematurely, or to reward the DPRK government just for talking. Sanctions should remain in place until there is irreversible momentum and verifiable progress toward denuclearization.

- Second, convince China to enforce United Nations Security Council sanctions. Ninety-five percent of North Korea's trade in merchandise is with China. Chinese leaders should recognize that a nuclear-armed North Korea is not in their interests due not only to the direct risk to China, but also because other nations, such as South Korea and Japan could conclude that they need their own nuclear weapons to deter North Korea. Secondary sanctions, such as asset freezes and trade embargoes, are appropriate to impose costs on countries and entities such as banks and shipping companies that assist North Korea in circumventing UN sanctions.
  
- Third, demonstrate the will and capability, if necessary, to employ military force against North Korea. Military exercises and preparation for a swift and overwhelming response to North Korean aggression are critical for successful diplomacy. Kim Jung Un must know that the United States and its allies possess the capability and, if faced with a potential nuclear strike, the will to impose denuclearization militarily without his cooperation.

Some argue that maximum pressure has not worked, but sanctions on North Korea have never been fully enforced and other forms of pressure, such as a sustained effort to penetrate North Korea's information blockade to counter the regime's narrative and *juche* ideology, have been pursued half-heartedly.

Finally, the success of coercive diplomacy in the form of maximum pressure depends in part on Kim's belief that the United States and its allies are more motivated to achieve denuclearization than he is to hold on to nuclear weapons and missiles. Maintaining strong alignment with South Korea and Japan is particularly important, but often problematic due to historical animosity between the U.S. allies. North Korea and China should see every provocation as driving U.S. allies closer together. A unified effort among likeminded nations is the best hope of convincing the Kim Family regime that it is better off without the most destructive weapons on earth.

### **Building Strategic Competence and Confidence**

Strategic empathy can provide a corrective to our narcissistic approach to foreign policy and national security strategy, protect against our tendency toward self-delusion, and decrease our vulnerability to cognitive traps such as optimism or confirmation bias. If we empathize with our future selves, we can also reduce our tendency to pursue short-term solutions to long-term problems. And a better understanding of the complex challenges we face will help us recognize the need to integrate all elements of national power and the efforts of likeminded partners to secure a better future for generations of Americans to come. The mantra of 'more diplomacy' is well intentioned, but too often diplomatic, economic, intelligence, military, and law enforcement efforts are disconnected from one another and, in some cases, work against one another.

Perhaps most important, the United States must possess the confidence to sustain a foreign policy based on the recognition that American security and prosperity at home depend on engagement abroad. It is clear that there is work to do at home to overcome the traumas of a pandemic, an economic recession, social divisions laid bare by George Floyd's murder, vitriolic partisanship, and the destructive interaction between racism and identity politics. But our effort to overcome those traumas, improve our nation, and regain confidence in what Americans hold dear should not encourage disengagement from challenges abroad. Introspection should provide an opportunity to clarify what Americans stand for and what

Americans must defend— individual liberty, the rule of law, freedom of expression, democratic governance, tolerance, and opportunity for all.

Education is vital to building strategic competence and confidence. Educating the public about critical competitions is an especially important task. A reinvigoration of history in higher-level education is important, as many courses in diplomatic and military history have been displaced by theory-based international relations courses, which tend to mask the complex causality of events and obscure the cultural, psychological, social and economic elements that distinguish cases from one another. There is a great deal of work to do in primary and secondary education to rekindle in our youth an understanding of our history, including not only the contradictions and imperfections in our experiment in democracy, but also the great promise of America. Americans should know that while the history of our foreign policy is not free neither of blunders nor avarice, our nation has been and remains a force for good in the world. As we review curricula to which our children are subjected we might remember the late professor and philosopher Richard Rorty's observation that "National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement."

Finally, education may also be the best way not only to reduce opportunity inequality, but also to strengthen our national defense. It may be time for a new initiative similar to the National Defense Education Act passed in 1958 in response to the Soviet Union's launching of *Sputnik*. Educated citizens are entrepreneurs who start new businesses and scientists who create medical breakthroughs like vaccines and innovate to solve interconnected problems like climate change and energy, food and water security. Educated citizens learn languages and connect with other societies, foster strategic empathy, and promote peace. And educated citizens appreciate the great gifts of our free and open society as well as what we must do together to defend our nation and improve it.