



Getting to Less?

The Minimal Exposure Strategy

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FEBRUARY 2020

THE ISSUE

This is the final CSIS Brief in a series called *Getting to Less*. The series explores different philosophies and motivations that could lead to a decreased emphasis on U.S. defense ends, ways, or means. In this brief, the authors discuss a strategy that they have labeled the Minimal Exposure Strategy.¹ The strategy's core premise is that the United States is largely secure from military threats due to continental U.S. geography and the deterrent quality of its nuclear and other strategic capabilities. Moreover, the strategy holds that U.S. military adventurism abroad creates significant costs and risks. Accordingly, the Minimal Exposure Strategy attempts to scale down the size and operational scope of the U.S. military. The CSIS authors explore likely changes that such a strategy might entail. The brief concludes by exploring the risks and opportunities associated with the Minimal Exposure Strategy.

INTRODUCTION

“The high cost of primacy is not its greatest shortcoming. The United States could spend more on its military, if it were truly essential. The real problem with primacy is that it isn’t necessary to maintain U.S. security. Instead, it undermines it by increasing the likelihood that the United States will become drawn into other people’s fights.”²

French Ambassador Jean-Jules Jusserand once described the strategic implications of America’s geographic location by stating: “On the north, she has a weak neighbor; on the south, another weak neighbor; on the east, fish, and the west, fish.”³ Geography aside, the United States

has a capable strategic nuclear force. Some prominent scholars believe that these factors have largely ensured that the United States does not face serious threats to its people and territory. These thinkers argue further that, by deploying forces throughout the world, the United States has actually made itself less safe by generating resentment, adding to the national debt, and being drawn into unnecessary conflicts. The Minimal Exposure Strategy presented here builds on these premises, illustrating a defense strategy that limits America’s security goals, scales back its forces, and shifts emphasis in defense missions and concepts.

PRINCIPLES AND ASSUMPTIONS

The Minimal Exposure Strategy holds that the United States is generally quite secure. Its geography is advantageous, and its nuclear weapons serve as a credible deterrent to attacks against it. Freeing the American taxpayer from the financial burden of empire-building and investing American time and talent on the domestic

economy, innovation, and society is vital to promoting U.S. interests. Far from advancing U.S. interests in the world, American interventionism abroad has created unnecessary enemies and inhibited the nation from reaching its full economic and societal potential. Nevertheless, adherents of the strategy see Chinese and Russian nuclear capabilities as posing existential risks for the United States. Accepting spheres of influence for major powers, such as China and Russia, while ensuring a strong deterrent to strategic attacks against U.S. territory, will provide the United States its greatest opportunity for peace and prosperity.

The U.S. military is focused foremost on deterring any adversary from attempting a nuclear strike against U.S. territory. Given the priority objective of safeguarding its sovereignty through territorial defense, the United States makes clear its willingness to consider use of all means at its disposal, including nuclear weapons, in response to devastating nuclear, chemical, biological, or conventional attacks at home. The United States also makes clear that, should deterrence fail, it has the capabilities to mobilize a swift and significant nuclear and conventional response against any adversary in any part of the world. The nation's leadership is explicit that it does not seek global primacy in its foreign policy or military capabilities and that its threshold for military use is high.

Although it seeks to work in partnership with other countries where interests align, the United States does not see such relationships as necessarily enduring. It thus prioritizes the need to incentivize allies and partners to defend themselves. As such, the United States withdraws its military forces from Europe and exits the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The United States also ends its treaty commitments in Asia and seeks a repeal of the Taiwan Relations Act. The Rio Treaty is also formally abandoned. Finally, the United States ends its presence in the Greater Middle East, including withdrawing forces from Afghanistan and Syria. Coincident with these conventional force moves, the United States ceases the guarantee of its extended nuclear deterrent to allies.

In maintaining and growing economic security by ensuring that international trade continues to flourish, the United States contributes military capabilities to maintaining freedom of the seas, airspace, cyberspace, and space. However, all nations are expected to contribute to these ends, as all will economically gain. Working with others on counterterrorism and counterproliferation also remains important, but much of that work occurs outside of the military sphere. International economic forums and

diplomatic outreach take a more central role in U.S. foreign policy. Private philanthropy, which the Minimal Exposure Strategy predicts will grow with the strategy's reduced tax burden, supplants government giving for overseas humanitarian assistance.

The Minimal Exposure Strategy does not seek a military response for most potential threats to the U.S. homeland. Civil authorities, and resilience investments, should be the bulwarks for U.S. homeland security, including during wartime.

PRIMARY CONTINGENCIES AND MISSIONS

The sizing and shaping of U.S. forces for the Minimal Exposure Strategy is driven mostly by the need to be ready for the following most stressing combination of contingencies:

- Deter and, if needed, respond swiftly and effectively to an adversary's use of weapons of mass destruction against U.S. territory. This may include U.S. use of nuclear weapons.
- Deter and, if needed, respond swiftly and effectively to a conventional, cyber, or space-based attack against U.S. territory. The United States must be prepared to respond across all domains and defeat the attacker over time, where defeat is defined as the long-term degradation of the adversary's capacity to wage war against the United States.
- Be prepared to generate defense support to civil authorities for consequence management efforts in the aftermath of catastrophic events, such as the use of weapons of mass destruction against U.S. territory.

At all other times, the United States must ensure its forces are capable of undertaking the following missions:

- Maintain capability for limited direct strike operations to prevent or respond to limited attacks against the United States, including terrorist attacks.
- Contribute U.S. forces and capabilities to protecting freedom of the seas, airspace, cyberspace, and space, alongside like-minded nations.
- Contribute U.S. forces and capabilities, as available and relevant, to multilateral humanitarian efforts.

OPERATIONAL CONCEPTS

Deterrence through punishment is the primary operational concept in this strategy. Its approach rests on an assumption that there is a low probability of a military attack against U.S. territory. It thus relies on a minimal, yet ready, second-strike nuclear capability to deter strategic attacks. It also seeks a non-nuclear response

ability to degrade an attacker's ability to wage war, and to do so without significant forces forward positioned. Long-range strike, especially stand-off capability, cyber, and space assets that can overwhelm adversary defenses and destroy a sufficient percent of its fielded assets and military industrial complex, are critical. Special operators and small numbers of ground forces might be needed for associated missions, such as securing weapons of mass destruction or destroying enemy command and control nodes, but not for occupation of adversary territory and stabilization operations.

Except for such cases of territorial defense, escalation control becomes the critical operational imperative in the Minimal Exposure Strategy. As one key method of escalation control, the United States must stay out of competitors' perceived spheres of influence. In exceptional circumstances, the United States engages in selective direct-action counterterrorism missions or other limited strike operations intended to prevent an imminent threat to the United States, relying wherever possible on standoff strike platforms. When stand-in operations are deemed necessary, the strategy preferences unmanned naval and air assets. The Minimal Exposure Strategy also seeks to have cyber, information operations, and space capabilities that can be used in limited circumstances. Below the major war threshold, the strategy emphasizes proportionality of response in order to establish deterrence and de-escalate conflict.

GLOBAL POSTURE

Under the Minimal Exposure Strategy, U.S. military posture is significantly reconfigured, with very limited U.S. forces based overseas. U.S. forces are entirely withdrawn from the Greater Middle East, including Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. In Western Europe and Asia, select naval and air assets remain. In Asia, those forces are based in or operate from Guam and Hawaii. In Europe, remaining forces located away from Russia's borders, and only where operationally and financially advantageous arrangements can be made. Some Special operations forces are at times deployed around the world to engage in direct action that prevents attacks on U.S. personnel or territory. U.S.-based naval forces, to include naval air assets, are deployed to contribute to broader global efforts to secure freedom of international seas and airspace deemed vital to U.S. economic security.

KEY FORCES AND CAPABILITIES

The Minimal Exposure Strategy's force and capabilities choices fall into three broad categories: nuclear forces and

missile defense, conventional and special operations forces, and space and cyber capabilities.

NUCLEAR FORCES AND MISSILE DEFENSE

This strategy calls for the United States to unilaterally reduce to a land-sea nuclear dyad of 500 warheads, eliminate the nuclear bomber leg while retaining some conventional bombers, and weight capability heavily toward the nuclear powered, ballistic missile (SSBN) fleet.⁴ The United States removes dual-capable aircraft from Europe and will not pursue any additional non-strategic nuclear forces, including those contemplated in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review. There is no extended nuclear deterrent for allies.

The Minimal Exposure Strategy returns the national missile defense program to a research effort. It views this change as advantageous to strategic stability by strengthening U.S. adherence to a mutually assured destruction doctrine. Those theater defenses kept in the U.S. inventory, such as the Patriot batteries, are repositioned, where necessary, for defense of U.S. territory. Investment in homeland cruise missile defense is increased. As technology allows, the United States trades off current generation theater and cruise missile defenses for lower shot-cost concepts and capabilities for theater and point defense.

CONVENTIONAL AND SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES

Conventional forces also have a role to play in the event of a nuclear, chemical, biological, or other mass destruction attack against the United States, as well as in stopping any conventional, cyber, or space-based incursion on U.S. territory. Precision and long-range standoff capabilities in all domains are especially desired in the Minimal Exposure Strategy. The United States maintains adequate conventional capability to protect U.S. airspace and waterways, with the latter a primary responsibility of the U.S. Coast Guard rather than Navy. The military particularly prizes inexpensive, long-duration means of sensing and reporting for these missions. Overall, reductions in size, modernization, and readiness are made across most of the conventional force.

Under the Minimal Exposure Strategy, the Army is reduced significantly in line with the strategy's call for a small and highly ready ground force, bolstered by a relatively large reserve component that can be mobilized. Infantry Brigade Combat Teams are reduced in both the active and reserve components. The majority of Armored Brigade Combat Teams units are placed in the reserve component, Combat Aviation Brigades are more than halved, and the Security Forces Assistance Brigades are eliminated. The Marine Corps faces

smaller reductions in its structure, continuing to serve as an expeditionary force geared toward projecting conventional power when necessary.

The Navy's total ship count under this strategy is dramatically reduced. Its surface fleet contributes to internationally sourced freedom of the seas operations but is otherwise concentrated on aiding the U.S. Coast Guard in territorial defense. Carrier strike groups are sized to provide for one group routinely at sea. Small surface combatants serve to patrol the seas off U.S. coasts and the Western Hemisphere, additive to U.S. Coast Guard missions and assets. The one area of naval growth is in the attack submarine fleet, which provides a high-end capability focused on deterrence and strike. The nuclear-capable SSBN fleet is reduced but maintains operational capability in line with the strategy's nuclear posture. This provides the ability to have one SSBN at sea at any given time.

The Air Force under the Minimal Exposure Strategy makes significant cuts to aerial refueling and airlift capabilities given the lack of need for short-range forces and enablers. Fighters are also reduced in line with the reduced requirement for short-range capabilities, with cuts to both stealthy and non-stealthy fighters.

The strategy values long-range (non-nuclear) stealth bombers that are able to punish an adversary decisively and quickly with the land-sea nuclear dyad. The B-1B and reserve component B-52s are eventually eliminated. Some B-21 bombers are retained but exclusively for conventional purposes.

Special operations forces are significantly reduced under the strategy given the lessened need for offensive capabilities, though some of the units maintained are positioned overseas to engage in direct action, preventing attacks on U.S. personnel or the homeland.

SPACE AND CYBER CAPABILITIES

In space, the Minimal Exposure Strategy is defense oriented, aimed at avoiding unintended escalation risks and, as part of a civilian-led effort, ensuring protection of critical U.S. infrastructure. Offensive use is considered only in response to an attack on U.S. space systems or as needed to defeat a military attack on the United States. Space priorities focus on defensive capabilities and call for the creation of a space sensor layer constellation. Wideband and narrowband communication satellites are shifted to the commercial sector, while space situational awareness satellites, such as Geosynchronous Space Situational Awareness Program, are eliminated.

As with space capabilities, cyber capabilities are considered for offensive use only in response to an attack on U.S. cyber systems or as needed to defeat a military attack on the United States. The United States focuses instead on defensive cyber capabilities, aimed at avoiding unintended escalation risks and as part of a civilian-led effort to protect critical U.S. infrastructure.

INDUSTRIAL BASE AND INSTALLATION IMPLICATIONS

Minimal Exposure Strategy proponents argue that greater competition, in conjunction with the significant force structure cuts outlined above, will generate greater taxpayer value. The strategy thus implements a series of reforms aimed at improving efficiencies within the defense acquisition system. A full audit of the Department of Defense (DoD) is important to the Minimal Exposure Strategy as a means of identifying potential sources of waste, fraud, and abuse. The United States also opens its defense industrial base to foreign competition by repealing existing statutes such as "Buy American" and the Jones Act and maximizes the opening of U.S. markets within any remaining statutory restrictions. Additionally, the DoD seeks to reform its maintenance and supply systems to increase efficiencies, which includes "opening up an additional 10 percent of depot work to bidding from private contractors" and resuming competition between the private and public sectors for certain functions, under the long-dormant Office of Management and Budget Circular A-76.⁵

Regarding international defense trade, the United States promotes limited defense trade among democratic allies that occurs on a fair basis and "directly enhances American security."⁶ Additionally, the United States bans arms sales to "high-risk" countries, defined as countries where there is a significant risk of misuse, loss of control, or active conflict.⁷ These actions reinforce the strategy's reluctance to become mired in overseas conflicts. Also for this reason, international investment in the U.S. defense industry from allies is welcomed, but investment from "high-risk" countries is vigorously opposed.

The strategy accepts that its policies create substantial risk to the existing defense industrial base. This is particularly likely in sectors such as ground combat vehicles and shipbuilding, where international competition is strong. Defense industry consolidation would be a natural and accepted result of this approach.

Finally, beyond the force structure cuts outlined above, the United States makes substantial cuts to its headquarters and

basing infrastructure. Under the Minimal Exposure Strategy, the DoD consolidates its existing headquarters structures, which includes making sizable cuts to the Pentagon's civilian workforce. The DoD aims to conduct another round of Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) to eliminate excess infrastructure within the continental United States.⁸ Should congressional approval for a BRAC round falter, the executive branch would seek to consolidate to the maximum extent possible under existing statutes.

ASSESSING RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The most significant opportunity presented by the Minimal Exposure Strategy is the prospect that it could reduce the costs in lives and treasure incurred by American military interventions abroad. At the same time, a core risk of the strategy is its assumption that geography is a core determinant for U.S. security and prosperity. Many modern threats can overcome terrestrial distance, and state and non-state access to these threats is only expanding. This includes missiles, cyber operations, space operations, information warfare, and political and economic warfare. Indeed, many of these are the very capabilities that the United States tries to develop under this strategy; one should assume others will as well. A second core risk is the strategy's reliance on strategic capabilities to deter such attacks. If massive retaliation is not perceived to be a morally, politically, or operationally feasible deterrent in these cases, then the nation will need to have other capabilities to deter smaller-scale challenges to U.S. territorial integrity and prosperity. Moreover, the inherently offensive nature of many of these capabilities may cause rivals to doubt the veracity of the Minimal Exposure Strategy's defensive intentions, perhaps enough for rivals to risk a first-mover advantage in a non-nuclear conflict.

Additionally, even more risk is incurred when one considers that U.S. territory is inconveniently located in the Pacific and that U.S. economic interests are globally dispersed. Notably, protecting Alaska, Hawaii, and Guam likely requires the positioning and exercise of capabilities beyond what the strategy's proponents envision. It also requires an ability to respond quickly, which may require more forces forward positioned than the strategy assumes. China, in turn, could perceive the readying and placement of these capabilities in U.S. Pacific territory as threatening to its sphere of influence, thereby increasing the possibility of conflict—and challenges in controlling its escalation.⁹ These risks are certainly lower under the Minimal Exposure Strategy than under today's strategy, but they are greater than proponents acknowledge.

Where the strategy assumes greater risk relative to today is in the operational readiness of U.S. forces to safeguard economic assets and American citizens abroad. Proponents would argue that such threats would themselves decline with a clear U.S. shift away from global ambition and interference. Even aside from that contention, proponents would likely be comfortable bearing such risks given the projected downsides to U.S. military responses in such situations. Minimal Exposure Strategy proponents would need to make these strategic trade-offs clear to the American people.

A key assumption under the Minimal Exposure Strategy is that a dramatically smaller force will reduce American political leaders' propensity to deploy the military. If this assumption does not hold, the strategy will likely create significant downstream costs. At a minimum, the strategy will be stress-tested if forces must be grown quickly. Nowhere will this risk be greater than in the industrial base, where the strategy's free market policies may require government intervention to meet emergent needs. Finally, as with the other strategies imagined in this series, the Minimal Exposure Strategy risks being unable to meet its desired ends if its expectation that other countries will share the burdens of securing the global commons is not met.

The CSIS study team assesses that its instantiation of the Minimal Exposure Strategy could generate approximately \$1.2 trillion in savings from the DoD's current program of record over a 10-year period (FY 2021-FY 2030), ramping up from approximately \$30 billion in defense savings in FY 2021 to just over \$200 billion per year in FY 2030.¹⁰ The pattern of increasing savings over time results from the compounding savings in Operations and Support (O&S) costs associated with each unit of force structure that is cut. For example, if one unit is cut in FY 2021, the O&S costs associated with that unit continue for each year thereafter. If a second unit is cut the following year, then those O&S savings are additive. This analysis suggests that major savings are unlikely to be realized immediately but rather will come over time.

CONCLUSION

The Minimal Exposure Strategy seeks an opportunity to focus attention and resources on the U.S. economy and American society. Its proponents likely overestimate the strategy's ability to sustain even transactional coalitions that share burdens in support of common causes, such as ensuring the free flow of American goods and services to markets abroad. If this is indeed an area of miscalculation,

it could result in more defense spending and greater risk to the U.S. economy than expected. However, if the Minimal Exposure Strategy is correct about the limited requirements for America's defense, and if future American leadership is equally restrained in its global ambitions, the nation could reap the benefits of more attention and resources to invest in domestic sources of national power.

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This material is based upon work supported by the Office of Net Assessment (ONA). Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the ONA or the DoD.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The Minimal Exposure Strategy is a creation of the authors for heuristic purposes and does not seek to represent the views of any other single author or work.

² Chris Preble, *Peace, War, and Liberty* (Washington, DC: Libertarianism.org, 2019), p. 134.

³ John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing,” *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 4 (July/August 2016), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-06-13/case-offshore-balancing>.

⁴ “A submarine-based monad, along with conventional capability, can provide all the deterrence we need, and save roughly \$20 billion a year. A dyad of ICBMs and SLBMs saves much less, but has a better chance of enactment due to the politics of bombers.” This particular dyad configuration has been suggested by Benjamin Friedman, Christopher Preble, and Matt Fay, *The End of Overkill? Reassessing U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy* (Washington, DC: CATO Institute, 2013), https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/the_end_of_overkill_wp_web.pdf.

⁵ Sustainable Defense Task Force, *Debt, Deficits, and Defense: A Way Forward* (Washington, DC: Sustainable Defense Task Force, June 2010), <https://www.comw.org/pda/fulltext/1006SDTReport.pdf>.

⁶ Trevor Thrall and Caroline Dorminey, *Risky Business: The Role of Arms Sales in U.S. Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: CATO Institute, March 2018), <https://object.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/pa-836.pdf>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Benjamin H. Friedman and Christopher Preble, *Budgetary Savings from Military Restraint* (Washington, DC: CATO Institute, September 2010), <https://object.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/PA667.pdf>.

⁹ Particularly with regard to defense of Alaska, the same may be said about Russia.

¹⁰ The cost evaluation that led to these estimates was based on a hypothetical military force structure developed in accordance with the assumptions, missions, and capabilities outlined in the Minimal Exposure Strategy. The evaluation represents the net change from the current program of record for the DoD from FY 2021-FY 2030. Cuts in force structure were implemented gradually to reflect an orderly stand-down of operational forces. Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) costs were not factored in given the lack of projections in budget justification documents but are expected to decline to \$10 billion in total by FY 2024, according to the FY 2020 budget request.