

DECEMBER 2020

GLOBAL SECURITY FORUM 2020

*A NEW
ERA
FOR U.S.
ALLIANCES*



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A Report of the CSIS International Security Program

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INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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Acknowledgments

This report is made possible by the generous support of Leonardo DRS. The authors extend special thanks to workshop moderators Michael Green, Sarah Ladislaw, and Heather Conley, as well as scenario managers Habiba Ahmed, Asya Akca, and Adam Saxton. Lachlan Carey provided expert guidance on likely climate change dynamics.

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Foreword

U.S. global leadership has been insufficient over the past four years, too often relying on an empty chair or hollow words when key interests are at stake. Close U.S. allies—such as Japan in Asia and Germany in Europe—have stepped into more active roles. But that space has also been filled by Russia and, especially, China, whose aggressive authoritarian actions are now the greatest challenge the United States faces.¹ The best way to meet today’s challenges is to reinvest in U.S. allies and partners and shape new mechanisms for cooperative action on twenty-first century issues.

Geopolitics in coming decades will be substantially defined by economic competition. Those countries that lead in emerging technologies and shape technical standards will enjoy returns that extend into strategic advantage. This is a vital arena in which the United States and its allies must do more to cooperate and compete.

Economic, technological, information, human security, and military power now intersect to make many of the challenges our world faces horizontal, but our organizations remain vertical. The United States must adapt its alliance system to a world that is more multipolar, more interconnected, and less manageable through siloed frameworks.

America’s adversaries have leveraged “gray zone” measures short of war to chip away at the credibility of the U.S. alliance system. The world order for which the United States and U.S. allies stand has been undermined by Russia’s annexation of Crimea and China’s coercive expansionism in the South China Sea. And the greatest U.S. economic accomplishments of the last 30 years engender interdependencies that create risk as well as reward.

Americans might be tempted to retreat from the world. But U.S. leaders cannot follow that route if the United States is to confront tomorrow’s challenges, whether climate crises, gray zone provocations, or military confrontations. America’s allies have always been a force multiplier, and in this new era they should form the basis for cooperation not just on the battlefield but in the economic and technological spheres.

John Hamre
President & CEO

Executive Summary

The U.S.-led system of alliances is more important than ever. Global cooperation with U.S. leadership has long undertaken responsibility for economic stability, nonproliferation, counterterrorism, and prevention of large-scale violent conflict. In 2020, as the country prepares to transition from the Trump presidency to a new Joseph R. Biden, Jr. administration, that list of responsibilities now includes managing a global pandemic while reinvigorating the power of American values in competition with an increasingly coercive China. The United States will need allies, partners, and friends as it wrestles with a changing international order; more capable and numerous rivals; and mounting challenges to human security at home and abroad.

Purpose built for the Cold War, the alliance system has proven its utility time and again in a constantly evolving security environment. Yet, alliances face growing strain. Tough questions are being asked in Washington and allied capitals about how alliances will stand up to compounding challenges that span military, economic, geopolitical, and technological arenas of competition and conflict. Allies' relative threat perceptions and collective will to sacrifice seem increasingly unaligned or divergent. Adversaries actively seek to exploit divisions and further fragment alliance relations.

The 2020 Global Security Forum workshop convened a bipartisan group of 60 leading national security experts to examine how best to adapt the U.S.-led alliance system to meet this new era of complex challenges.

Experts considered three distinct, difficult scenarios set in hypothetical futures between 2024 and 2030. They examined the relative alignment of U.S. and allied interests in these plausible “worlds” and recommended steps that could be taken today to strengthen future alliance cohesion, capability, and capacity. There was clear consensus on challenges and opportunities. However, it was also clear that more detailed study and thought is necessary to identify clear strategies to address these hard cases. Modernizing alliances to fulfill emerging needs will be a central challenge for the new U.S. administration and allied governments worldwide, requiring dedicated attention separate from immediate crisis response.

GSF 2020 Scenarios

Taiwan 2025: The People's Republic of China blockades Taiwan and uses its military and economic clout to deter global response.

Climate Crisis 2030: The world grapples with multiple ongoing climate-related catastrophes driving food insecurity, mass migration, and border security challenges.

Russia 2024: Russian interference in U.S. elections leads to an escalating cyber and space conflict with the United States which threatens to spill over into armed conflict.

Four crosscutting themes identified by the experts' workshop can help to strengthen alliances:

- 1. Alliances begin in phase zero.** Alliances are only as strong as the careful preparation and alignment of interests, understanding, and trust that occur prior to crises. The deeper and more routine the consultation and cooperation, the greater the strength of alliances when tested.
- 2. Twenty-first century threats are regional and global.** Alliances struggle to balance between addressing regional and global challenges. The U.S.-led alliance system remains largely compartmentalized by geography, making inefficient use of overall strengths.
- 3. Today's threats occur at the intersection of military, diplomatic, and economic concerns.** Policymakers must better integrate the many tools of statecraft. To make best use of individual and collective strengths across this spectrum of capabilities, alliances should also seek to better include the depth within many allied countries, including regional and local governments, private businesses, and non-governmental organizations.
- 4. Alliances depend on shared understanding and sacrifice.** Controlling escalation across a range of future potential contingencies relies upon adversaries' perceptions of the credibility and will of the United States and its allies to sacrifice on a shared basis. This requires significant pre-crisis alignment between allies—especially regarding gray zone threats—as well as clear communication and demonstration of will with foreign and domestic audiences.

In conclusion, the future alliance system will rely on both renewal of existing bedrock structures and the addition of new purpose-built organizations and enduring coalitions that focus on addressing key challenges in democratic institutions, supply chains, technology governance and other emerging issues. When the new Biden administration takes office in January 2021, it must balance immediate crisis response with dedicated effort to strengthen alliances for the decades ahead.

Recommendations

Reaffirm U.S. commitments and leadership while expanding consultation.

- **Build confidence among allies** and in U.S.-led multilateral frameworks through a return to frequent consultations at all levels.
- **Pursue a collaborative and coordinated approach to Indo-Pacific allies** to develop long-term policy toward shared security and development goals. Where possible, establish straightforward understanding about the core interests and values that will require shared sacrifice and collective action to advance.
- **Expand Five Eyes to include other core European and Asian allies** to build shared understanding both before and during crises.
- **Develop new roles for alliances** through cooperation in areas such as democracy promotion, trade and supply chain resilience, and emerging technologies governance.

Restructure the foreign policy apparatus to promote cohesive alliance strategy.

- **Expand contingency planning** beyond the Pentagon to include the Department of State, key allies, non-governmental organizations, and private companies.
- **Better integrate regional and functional bureaus and offices across the U.S. government**, including in the Department of State, the Department of Defense, and other relevant departments and agencies.
- **Reform national security career paths for career U.S. civilians**, incenting interagency experiences in professional career development to increase cross-regional and cross-functional perspectives and build cooperative relationships across the national security community.

Cultivate new structures and partners to confront twenty-first century challenges.

- **Develop an alliance of democracies** such as a “D9” or “D10” to identify and stand united against the threats posed by authoritarian adversaries and movements.
- **Increase cooperation in priority regions and on priority issues through “minilateral” venues** to address specific regional security challenges, improve communication and interoperability, ameliorate bilateral tensions, and develop shared commitments and threat perceptions.
- **Create issue-based alliance teams**, such as a formalized “5G brain trust” collaboration including governments and firms in the United States, Sweden, Finland, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan.

- **Elevate the role of non-state stakeholders in U.S. alliances**, bringing key actors to the table with concrete tools and capabilities that supplement state-led efforts. Leverage public-private partnerships, for example, to develop and use the latest technology for crisis early-warning systems and to insulate key supply chains from economic coercion.

Reassert an interest in global cooperation and humanitarianism.

- **Enhance information and intelligence sharing on famine and environmental threats** through an improved multilateral Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) covering a broader geography that includes partners in the developing world.
- **Promote international peer-to-peer non-governmental collaboration in research** that improves resiliency in agriculture, technology, infrastructure, and other drivers of migration.
- **Emphasize regional solutions that invest at the source of migration** and incorporate non-state actors so political will is more concentrated among the immediate stakeholders, facilitating cooperation and greater impact on the issue at hand.

Revitalize NATO for a new era of competition.

- **Consult with NATO allies to strengthen the integrity and power of Article 5** to address gray zone efforts and offensive cyber operations.
- **Push to strengthen the internal governance requirements for NATO membership**, providing incentive for politically divergent allies to reform.
- **Promote further partnerships between NATO and strategically aligned states**, including Partnership for Peace countries, allies in Asia, and other rising democracies.

Invest in stronger and more networked Indo-Pacific alliances and partnerships.

- **Continue the military, diplomatic, and economic rebalance toward the Indo-Pacific.** Ensure the participation of all four “Quad” members in the 2021 Malabar exercises. Dedicate a greater percentage of Foreign Military Finance resources to allies and partners with shared interests and values. Promote trade agreements that bolster allies’ resilience to economic coercion.
- **Support “minilateral” and informal, issue-based groupings** in the Indo-Pacific to achieve stronger relationships and greater interoperability among U.S. allies and partners.
- **Enhance credibility and clarity** through consultative diplomacy among Indo-Pacific allies on difficult topics such as Taiwan. Link U.S. interests with the interests of regional allies and partners.

Introduction

The Importance of Allies and Partners in U.S. Foreign Policy

The U.S.-led global alliance system has been a centerpiece of the international order since the end of World War II.² These alliances have proved remarkably agile and durable even after the Cold War, surviving difficult tests ranging from the Iraq War to Russia's annexation of Crimea. And from Afghanistan to Libya, allies have reaffirmed mutual defense commitments and the power of collective action in the international system. The United States and its allies also unquestionably expanded the scope of their security cooperation across a vast and complex global set of challenges, from piracy to cybersecurity.



Italian forces provide one of the largest national contingents to the Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan and command the Western region HQ in Herat.

Aref Karimi/AFP via Getty Images

In a rapidly changing world, the U.S. system of alliances is more important than ever. The economics and politics of the Covid-19 era are by turns revealing, revising, and accelerating transitions in global politics, with the central organizing principles for the emerging world order not yet clear. During the 1990s and early-2000s, the United States enjoyed such overwhelming primacy that it could address its greatest security concerns unilaterally if it so chose.³ Today, the greatest threats to U.S. security include near-peer competition and global climate change; addressing them unilaterally would be extremely difficult.⁴

At the same time, pressures on alliances are growing. Although the United States and its allies have continued to rely on each other for a variety of security needs, they have seldom revised the agreed rationale for these relationships.⁵ The laws, norms, and institutions underpinning the international system are also under increasing stress. From trade protectionism to emerging technologies governance, multilateral institutions and modes of cooperation are fracturing. Simultaneously, the range of global challenges, advanced military threats, and gray zone provocations remains daunting.



Russian use of “deniable” forces in eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea.

Sean Gallup/Getty Images

Difficult questions are being raised across alliance capitals. In Washington, these questions have been largely couched in terms of cost and burden sharing, from defense spending as a percentage of gross domestic product to host-nation support for U.S. forces stationed abroad. A vocal minority has continued to focus on the risks of foreign entanglement. While the political atmosphere of the United States has suggested a turn toward isolationism and protectionism, the Chicago Council Survey shows broad bipartisan support for U.S. engagement in world affairs and that 74 percent of Americans believe alliances contribute to U.S. safety.⁶ A Pew Center study supplements this finding, stating that a majority of Americans (68 percent) believe “the U.S. should take the interests of allies into account,

even if it means making compromises, [rather] than think the U.S. should follow its own national interests when allies disagree.”⁷

In foreign capitals, U.S. allies are voicing fundamental concerns about U.S. leadership priorities and enduring commitment. Central to allies’ concerns is the increased economic, military, and political power of China. The sharp policy shifts between the Obama and Trump administrations, and likely recalibration again under a new Biden administration have raised questions about the durability of any new U.S. commitments. Especially in the Indo-Pacific region, allies worry whether the United States will be an effective leader or partner in deterring Chinese aggression and advancing a “free and open” region. In Europe, allies worry about the heated anti-ally rhetoric in Washington that flared during the Trump administration and whether America will turn its attention away from Europe’s threats to the south and east regardless of which party controls U.S. foreign policy.

Adversaries recognize the U.S.-led alliance system as a strategic advantage. They also note its vulnerability, and they routinely and systematically seek to weaken and fracture its bonds. Russia orchestrates complex campaigns of political influence, disinformation, and other means of interference with core democratic institutions. China relies upon economic influence to enable political suasion. North Korea and Iran constitute complex security challenges, seeking to deter international cooperation efforts against them through military buildup and a broad set of irregular capabilities.

Alliance management remains vital to achieving U.S. security interests, but it will be more difficult as power diffuses toward multipolarity and adversaries sow and exploit divisions. Some bilateral relationships will likely require fresh attention. In other cases, wholesale reconstruction or reconceptualization of alliance cooperation could be necessary to suit changed circumstances and interests.

Background

U.S. alliances exist within two major frameworks: the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Europe and the Pacific “hub-and-spokes” structure of a complex web of bilateral U.S. alliances and partnerships through regional organizations.⁸ Both have proven over the past 70 years to be major contributors to regional stability, serving to reduce the possibility of conflict as well as to contain it and prevail when it does erupt.⁹ Today, both architectures also share a common challenge. The original context and rationale for U.S. alliances have changed in the years since they were created, while their formats and terms of reference largely have not.¹⁰

Europe and NATO

NATO was formed in 1949 with the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty, combining post-war European and U.S. forces to counter expansion by the Soviet Union and simultaneously prevent resurgence of the political forces and regional enmities that had led to two world wars.¹¹ In rapid fashion, NATO expanded beyond the democratic core of Western Europe to include anti-communist regimes in Greece and Turkey, taking a more liberal interpretation of its emphasis on democratic regimes.¹² Decades later, NATO dramatically expanded following the end of the Cold War through three major enlargement rounds incorporating former Soviet states in Central and Eastern Europe.¹³ Throughout this period and as the institutions and political identity of the European Union grew simultaneously, NATO preserved European cohesion and facilitated peaceful relations among longtime adversaries.

NATO also quickly proved its utility to shared interests beyond the Cold War, shifting in the 1990s and 2000s to address new challenges from regional security in the Balkans to growing transnational threats outside Europe. Most notably, following the attacks of September 11, 2001, NATO member forces were engaged alongside the United States, including through the 2001–2014 International Security



The official ceremony creating the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Washington on April 4, 1949.

AFP/AFP via Getty Images

Assistance Force mission.¹⁴ NATO issued an updated Strategic Concept in 2010 that highlighted these accomplishments and called for clarified and deepened relations with key state and non-state partners, greater contingency planning, and more extensive consultation as part of an updated approach to less conventional threats.¹⁵ In many ways, it has been successfully implemented.

Today, NATO faces three primary internal challenges to its core mission. First, the alliance faces continued tension over burden sharing and defense spending in the organization.¹⁶ Second, there is widespread allied concern about Turkey's behavior and the re-emergence of tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, including between Greece and Turkey.¹⁷ The third is, the rise of populism and subsequent democratic backsliding in some eastern states along NATO's frontier compromises alliance cohesion.¹⁸

NATO also faces a growing list of external challenges. These include increased threats in the Eastern Mediterranean, an aggressive Russian presence on land and maritime borders, including in the Arctic, and continued Russian encroachment in Ukraine.¹⁹ The ongoing Syrian civil war and resulting refugee crisis have also constituted an enduring challenge for NATO.

Today, in what the 2018 *National Defense Strategy* terms "long-term strategic competition" with China, the United States might wish for NATO to position itself clearly on the U.S. side.²⁰ However, although

the European Union has recognized China as a competitor and “systemic rival,” European countries have different and varying perceptions of China and the threat it poses to global peace and stability.²¹ Many European countries sustain important bilateral trade and investment with China and benefit from Chinese Belt and Road Initiative investments.²²

The Indo-Pacific Region

In the Indo-Pacific region, the United States manages a combination of what Victor Cha has described as spokes (bilateral alliances) centered on the hub of the United States.²³ This decentralized system helped the United States prevent the spread of communism during the Cold War while also maximizing U.S. leverage to restrain each ally from actions contrary to overall regional stability.

Some U.S. strategists have wished for an “Asian NATO,” but the decentralized history of alliances in the region combined with continued, pervasive, cross-cutting tensions between states continue to inhibit the formation of formal, binding multilateral organizations focused foremost on security matters.²⁴ The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) exemplifies the kind of multilateral organization that results, based on consensus and focused on the goals of development and non-interference. It is an important forum for consultative diplomacy, but it is not a rule-making body or a common market.²⁵

“Mini-lateral” cooperation focused on security in the Indo-Pacific has produced mixed results. Japan and South Korea, for example, share an interest in managing the threat of North Korea, but their antagonistic mutual history periodically destabilizes U.S.-Japan-South Korean defense partnership and intelligence-sharing.²⁶ The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (“the Quad”) between Japan, Australia,



US Navy personnel disperse aid as part of Operation Unified Assistance in the aftermath of the devastating 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami.

KAZUHIRO NOGI/AFP via Getty Images

India, and the United States shows some promise as a security organization, though it is far from becoming a formal defense treaty organization. It was conceived by the George W. Bush administration in response to the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami and formally incorporated in 2017. Over the past year in particular, it has strengthened across military, political, and economic lines.²⁷

The lack of an Asian multilateral security alliance underscores several factors that complicate an U.S. alliance strategy to counter China. One challenge is that many U.S. allies, or “spokes,” lie partly or almost fully within China’s sphere of influence.²⁸ China has increasingly found ways to exploit these weaknesses to soften resistance to its regional and global agenda.²⁹ It has grown more emboldened and more aggressive in the past year especially through its “wolf warrior” diplomacy in the midst of COVID-19.

Key Insights

To assess the state of U.S. alliances and their preparedness for the anticipated challenges of the next several decades, CSIS assembled a carefully selected bipartisan group of high-level experts for a virtual half-day workshop on September 30, 2020 (see Appendix A). They were convened to provide their perspectives on how to prepare U.S. alliances for a difficult future. Experts were divided into three distinct groups, each tasked to consider a high-stress hypothetical future scenario (see Appendix B). They were asked to take as a given that this future contingency had occurred and, within its context, to analyze two key dimensions. First, they were to compare the relative interests and priorities of the United States with those of its allies and partners in the scenario, noting challenges and opportunities these present for allied strategies to confront the crisis. Second, they were to “backcast” to the present to recommend changes that could be made in the conduct and cultivation of U.S. alliances today to optimize for a range of future challenges.³⁰ The proceedings were captured under the Chatham House Rule to allow for candid exchange and inform this report with recommendations made on a bipartisan basis.

Four key insights emerged from the workshop. First, most participants agreed that U.S. alliance relationships and the alliance system overall needed urgent investment in order to play their optimal role in any of the three scenarios presented. The preparatory investment and adaptation ideas are discussed further below using the military planning concept of “phase zero.” Second, twenty-first century threats are both regional and global—as are the considerations involved in response and mitigation efforts. Third, twenty-first century threats play out in the intersection of defense, diplomacy, and economics. Addressing the most pressing security challenges of the next few decades will require greater horizontal integration of the threats, opportunities, and policy options across all three domains of competition. The fourth insight from the forum was that effective alliances involve shared understanding and sacrifice. Across the three scenarios, experts stressed the need for renewed

clarity, persuasion, and consultation wherever appropriate to strengthen alliances. These four insights are described in further detail below.

Alliances Begin in “Phase Zero”

Military planners have for decades used the phrase “phase zero” to refer to the pre-conflict activities necessary to shape a more favorable environment if and when conflict does erupt. In the same way, alliances need deliberate planning and activities to set the conditions for success in crisis. As former Secretary of State George Schultz once analogized of alliances, “[i]f you have a garden and you want to see things flourish, you have to tend to it.”

A crucial insight from this year’s expert workshop is that the U.S. alliance system and the political relationships underlying these alliances are not ready for some of the most stressing future scenarios these alliances may face. Despite strong economic, military, and political cooperation, far more phase zero work remains to be done. Gray zone threats from Russia and China reveal particular vulnerabilities, as does the collective action problem of the environmental, humanitarian, and security challenges posed by climate change.

There is a particular need to align around a shared set of interests and threat perceptions or to better coordinate on how divergences can and should be managed in the event of crisis. Such effort would better enable swift, clear, and unified responses in the event of a major contingency. Strengthened understanding can be achieved by three principal means. The first is expanded intelligence sharing and surveillance. The second is advocacy to connect U.S. interests with those of allies and partners. And the third is a more consultative and mutual approach to partnership.

One example of expanded intelligence sharing and surveillance is the FEWS NET (famine early warning system) and climate data analytics, which provide excellent intelligence on likely environmental threats. As the workshop’s climate scenario demonstrated, these predictive capabilities are developed by the private sector for use in insurance and real estate markets and could be adjusted and scaled in partnership with government to address a wide range of threats.

The Taiwan scenario provided an example of the need to advocate for connecting systemic U.S. interests with the regional and economic interests of allies and partners. Experts in the forum observed that if the United States were to demur in the face of Chinese aggression against Taiwan, the damage to U.S. credibility in the region would be second only to the damage it would sustain if it were to try and fail to defend Taiwan. Such a situation reflects the disconnect between allies and partners’ strong preference for U.S. leadership and their threat perception in crises that could redefine the region’s leadership.³¹ One participant noted that the United States needs something “beyond the usual Pentagon planning process” for contingency planning with allies and partners that do not have a security commitment to Taiwan but whose interests would be drastically affected by a coerced reunification.

In the Russia scenario especially, participants highlighted the need for a more consultative and mutual approach. Without credibility, reliability, and consultation with allies before a contingency involving gray zone tactics and rapid escalation, the task of judging an attack on the United States as an attack on all NATO members is more difficult. The existing infrastructure of NATO provides an invaluable opportunity to enhance consultation and reaffirm the mutual benefit of the treaty, perhaps through a more balanced discussion of interests. Rather than deciding on a retaliatory response in

Washington, one participant noted, the United States could seek NATO members' participation from a set of proposals across the military, economic, and political sectors, allowing them to honor their commitment in accordance with their own threat perceptions and interests.

Another “phase zero” element permeating the conversations was the need to cultivate greater networking and interoperability among allies and partners—a theme to which this report will return. An effective response to the threats presented by a globalized and interdependent strategic environment requires greater integration of intelligence and capabilities. Though, as one scenario moderator noted, with greater networking and increased interoperability comes increased expectations for consultation before action.

Twenty-First Century Threats Are Regional and Global

In the course of discussing the workshop scenarios, participants were challenged to consider implications and potential response strategies beyond the geographic domains immediately at hand. In other words, they were asked to think across the alliance system. Participants in turn addressed the interests and potential roles that out-of-theater allies and partners might play and considered responding to adversaries in a different domain than the one in which the crisis originally occurred, including through horizontal escalation and the broader use of economic and other tools of statecraft.

For example, U.S. policymakers tend to focus exclusively on NATO allies during a confrontation with Russia, on Indo-Pacific states in a Taiwan contingency, and on action on the part of more developed state actors on climate change. Experts considering telecommunications vulnerabilities in the Russia scenario noted that the United States needed not only to rely on NATO, but should also think about partnerships with Indo-Pacific countries, and potentially a “telecommunications braintrust” combining Sweden, Finland, and South Korea.

As another example, in the context of the climate scenario, an expert suggested that a response to climate migration should include investment in underdeveloped regions that could absorb climate migrants: “In anticipation of massive migration, Bangladesh is investing in creating new infrastructure to accept migrants so that they don’t all move to the capital. Likewise, we might want to proactively invest in Mexico to create other magnets for migrants.” Broader thinking about strengths the United States and its allies bring to bear could yield new and effective pre-crisis deterrence and crisis response options.

Experts also agreed on the need to potentially organize alliances around the concept of a collective group of democracies, such as the D-10.³² As one participant observed, “[w]e need a global response, whether it’s a G7 or a G10 or whatever G we have by 2024.” Several participants spoke favorably of an expanded Five Eyes mechanism as well, expanding sensitive multilateral intelligence sharing beyond the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Such mid-sized multilateral security and economic organizations could offer collective security and agile crisis response for like-minded countries across regions of the world.

The UN Security Council and General Assembly continue to play a foundational role in steady-state international diplomacy and issue management, though that role is limited in any response to crises among the Security Council’s permanent members. Experts in the Taiwan and Russia scenarios noted that China and Russia could veto any Security Council resolutions to their strategic disadvantage in the scenarios. However, experts also emphasized that the UN General Assembly is able to vote on



G7 leaders discuss trade and international security in Biarritz, France on August 25, 2019.

PHILIPPE WOJAZER/AFP via Getty Images

nonbinding resolutions that support coercive actions undertaken by some members. Given the right intersection of interests, as in the 1956 Suez Crisis, a UN General Assembly resolution can marshal the authority and resources to reverse actions it deems illegitimate. While the United Nations struggles with consensus and enforceability, it is worth remembering that the first UN Peacekeeping Force was deployed to oversee a reversal of actions undertaken in part by two permanent members of the UN Security Council.³³

However, global multilateral organizations are not suited to every problem. In the context of the climate crisis scenario, participants noted that current powerful multilateral institutions steering response are comprised of more-developed states less affected by climate change, while those countries that will be most affected find themselves without access or influence. Participants noted that such a situation often lessens the incentive for countries to respond to growing issues with the urgency warranted.

Integrative regional organizations with fewer participants present fewer opportunities for defection, free riding, and consensus blocking. The United States might do better to address some issues through regional bodies or even at the subnational or city levels, which may prove more effective than global ones for some collective-action problems, even when they are transnational or global in scope. For example, regional and local governments are already taking the lead on climate change action. As one expert observed, “California is having a huge role in this diplomacy today, sometimes more so than the federal government. I don’t see that abating, because there may be more convergence of interests between, for example, border states than between federal governments.”

Another theme that emerged, particularly in the Russia scenario, was the divergence between the fundamentally global interests of the United States and the primarily regional interests of allies and partners. As mentioned previously, regional and global interests can overlap and influence each other, offering a touchstone for greater alignment of strategic priorities. However, U.S. diplomatic and

military attention to the regional interests and threat perceptions of allies tends to be organized in a bilateral and issue-bound manner. As one expert observed, the United States' "diplomatic apparatus is really built around sustaining bilateral relationships, rather than thinking more broadly." Here, contingency planning with multiple allies could build pre-crisis understanding of where tools of national influence might best integrate and where divergence of approaches or interests could present friction in crisis that is best understood and addressed ahead of time.

Several experts in the Russia scenario suggested a strategy that is based in greater "forward-deployed diplomacy and strategy," putting less emphasis on bilateral relationship maintenance in favor of a more integrated approach to regional and global diplomacy. Interdepartmental structures and norms currently make this difficult; the different arms of the U.S. government often do not divide labor across regions in a coordinated way. As another participant noted, "[t]he intelligence community's maps are not aligned with the Department of Defense's unified command plan, which in turn is not aligned with the bureau structure within the Department of State." These barriers of language, categorization, and effort duplication reinforce a siloed diplomatic approach to alliances and to foreign policy strategy more broadly.

Today's Threats Occur at the Intersection of Defense, Diplomacy, and Economics

Because the threats to U.S. and allied security cross domains, so must defenses and mitigation efforts. Participants in the Russia, Taiwan, and climate scenarios noted the ability of China and Russia to use coercive economic tools to extort and divide U.S. allies, from price-gouging behavior in the markets for Russian gas and agriculture, to Chinese retaliation with trade barriers and political hostage taking. In response, participants urged that the United States and its allies find the ability to deploy their own sets of coercive economic tools in concert but also identified the complex coordination necessary to do so multilaterally. Sanctions or boycotts would have to be coordinated with European allies, who inevitably would weigh the impact on their economy of these measures against the loss of the Chinese market in the case of escalation.

Trade "must be considered an element of each party's competitive structures in a crisis," whether leveraged intentionally as in the example above or considered as an unintended consequence, as one participant reminded the group. Pointing to the example of de-escalation between India and Pakistan in the early-2000s, they noted, "[w]hat ultimately deterred the Indians was when Coca-Cola and European and Japanese companies started evacuating people—just the signal from what firms and markets did on the ground in response to the threat of a crisis was enough."

Science and technology underpin U.S. strengths, particularly in the intersecting domains of defense and economics. This means that private firms are often caught between national security and business imperatives, while leaders of democratic nations are caught between the interests of private employers and the longer-term security interests of their people. As technology gains relative importance in defense capabilities, private innovation is more subject to national security interest and oversight.³⁴ As one participant in the Climate scenario memorably observed, "[t]he private technology sector, public sector, and philanthropic sector will have to find a new model to develop technology that aligns with U.S. interests [through blended finance]."

At the same time, science and technology also play an enormous role in cooperation to address shared threats. The role of American science and innovation will be crucial in addressing the human security aspects of climate change, and one participant highlighted the role of scientists during the Covid-19 pandemic as an example: “[l]ook at how much organic, peer-to-peer scientific collaboration there has been, independent of what states are actively pushing or facilitating.” To return for a moment to the “phase zero” theme, “[i]f you haven’t invested in those relationships beforehand, then it’s hard to build them in real time once a crisis breaks out.”

The siloed diplomatic approach mentioned in the previous section also characterizes the U.S. approach to military, diplomatic, and economic concerns. Beyond restructuring bureaus and offices, one participant stressed, the United States would benefit from “a fundamental rethink of [its] structural approach.” By dealing with economics, intelligence, security, information, space, and diplomatic relationships in siloes, the United States is “not able to execute a comprehensive strategy using all these tools.” Participants also pointed to deficiencies within the career development path for U.S. civil servants, who could be incentivized through hiring and promotion standards to develop their expertise across multilateral, joint, combined, and functional areas. This would better train a cadre of leaders to oversee an alliance system that integrates global, regional, and functional threats.

Alliances Demand Shared Understanding and Sacrifice

The three scenarios all revealed reluctance by U.S. allies to incur immediate economic costs. This contributed to an unequal (and sometimes difficult to predict) balance of interests across the players in any of the three scenarios, allowing the situation to deteriorate before key countries were willing to truly respond in unison.

This theme permeated the climate scenario, in particular where divergent interests and views of sovereignty clouded collective response to a potential global mass migration. As one expert summed



Japanese stocks tumbled following the August 2019 announcement of new U.S. tariffs on China.

Tomohiro Ohsumi/Getty Images

it up, there is “[z]ero chance, regardless of who’s in the White House, that the United States or other developed countries will participate in multilateral migration governance.” However, one participant reminded the group not to overlook historical examples of global collaboration to manage migration crises: “The post-WWII establishment of the global asylum regime, subsequent updates to that regime in later decades, the U.S. willingness to accept millions of Vietnamese boat people, the Mariel boatlift . . . Those were different eras, to be sure, but I think we should be cautious about assuming that the current antipathy toward migrants is immutable and will look the same in future decades.”

Mismatches of interests and stakes are often obvious to would-be aggressors who would seek to exploit weaknesses or ambiguities in alliances. For example, if China’s interest in Taiwan is greater than U.S. interest, then China’s escalation threats are more credible than those of the United States and its allies. Experts considering the Taiwan scenario assessed lesser interest in Taiwan among ASEAN countries, South Korea, and Australia, suggesting that the United States could not rely on their support in a standoff with China over Taiwan. Indeed, the Taiwan group expected only Japan would be prepared to view aggression in Taiwan as a direct threat to its own interests and stand ready to act alongside a forceful U.S. response.

The United States itself would face painful costs in this scenario. It would be able to credibly deter Chinese action only if it were prepared for a world in which China was not so economically integrated as it is today, effectively unraveling global supply chains and significantly affecting the interests of large sections of the U.S. and global economy.³⁵ Such an outcome would be catastrophic for the Chinese economy as well, though perhaps worth the risk because of Taiwan’s symbolic importance for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). One participant noted, “it’s a core interest, essential to CCP ideology and legitimacy.” At the same time, the symbolism, strategic location, and human rights of 24 million people are important to the United States and its allies as well. The participants in the Taiwan scenario settled on a “need for both escalation dominance and escalation control,” though the side with a lesser will to sacrifice for the contested objective may not be able to maintain both.

Gray zone strategies play on differential will, with adversaries taking deniable or below-threshold actions to tempt less interested parties away from escalating conflict. Wedge strategies exploit the “weakest links” in capability or will among any grouping. One participant relayed the impression of “many in the region, and even in Europe, that Taiwan and perhaps the nine-dash line represent the outer limits of China’s ambitions.” If relied upon, this impression would weaken an allied defense of Taiwan by offering a rationale for coercive reunification in the name of peace. Similarly, in the Russia scenario, some Eastern European countries were expected to be extremely unwilling to involve themselves in escalation to cyberattacks, rooted in bitter past experience of Russian retribution.

Conclusion

An Evolving Future Alliance System

Mismatches inevitably arise in an alliance system that remains largely optimized for the mid-twentieth century and the prevention of state-on-state warfare and territorial invasion. And yet, these alliances have prevented major country conflict for 70 years, illustrating the value of long-term alliance management and consistency of structure and composition. Regardless of future challenges, a core set of solid, long-term alliances with countries that share U.S. values and most U.S. interests provides an indispensable foundation for leadership and crisis management.

That has led many experts to conclude that rather than trying to radically modify existing alliances, it is better to purpose-build new structures to strengthen overall U.S. interests. Existing models can provide not just examples but foundations for the mechanisms needed. As mentioned previously, the Tsunami Core Group, formed in 2004 to coordinate disaster relief, provided the basis for today's Quadrilateral Security Dialogue.³⁶ And, just as the G-7 and G-20 were built to address the need for action on international finance and economic issues, participants suggested these as a model to prompt a purpose-built institution for the 2020s (e.g., the aforementioned D-10).

Experts across the CSIS workshop nodded to the growing call for like-minded countries to create “technology alliances” that can establish norms, frameworks, and standards around fifth-generation telecommunications (5G), artificial intelligence (AI) technology, data privacy, and intellectual property. AI and “big data” analytics underpin the crisis early-warning measures discussed in the climate scenario, but close partnership among privacy-oriented democracies will be needed to gather the necessary data sets. The Center for Security and Emerging Technology (CSET) at Georgetown has recently proposed partnership groupings tailored to particular technological objectives. For example, in the case of sharing pooled data sets, CSET recommends the United States pursue greater collaboration with the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, France, the Netherlands, and New Zealand.³⁷

As noted in the Russia scenario, “small and capable focused teams working on some of these critical issues like cyber, freedom of navigation, and space” will be important avenues to achieve shared interests. Where enforceable multilateral commitments have proved elusive or tracked the lowest common denominator, informal trilateral and quadrilateral forums can enable meaningful cooperation and problem solving on issues such as maritime security.³⁸ This is perhaps especially true in the Indo-Pacific, where many bilateral relationships are relatively weak and few countries are eager to join security initiatives that China would perceive as a threat.

And, because of the cross-domain and globalized issues involved in all three scenarios, participants noted the potential for alliance-like partnerships with non-state actors, such as non-governmental organization (NGOs), private companies, and subnational levels of government.

As one expert in the climate scenario observed, “maybe the way we define allies in this era should be different; if you consider the Paris Accords and the Arctic Council, you find a lot of potential allies that actually aren’t states.” Cooperation with these types of entities offers the potential to achieve goals that remain elusive at the state-to-state level.

New coalitions are not, however, a panacea. Political consultation measures, commitment enforcement mechanisms, leadership, and the time, place, and regularity of meetings all represent possible points of fracture, not to mention significant startup costs. They can also distract attention and resources from the core set of value- and interest-based alliances that form the foundation of U.S. strategy. In the end, alliance management is a balancing act between urgent and enduring priorities and interests.

Appendix A

Participants

Jon Alterman	J.D. Crouch	Bonnie Jenkins	Olga Oliker
Emma Ashford	Melissa Dalton	Bruce Jones	Mira Rapp-Hooper
Jerry Bennett	Robert Daly	Mara Karlin	Frank Rose
Johan Bergenas	Abe Denmark	Marcus King	Lisa Sawyer
Spencer Boyer	Eric Edelman	Jeremy Konyndyk	Kori Schake
Sharon Burke	Lindsey Ford	Sarah Ladislaw	Jennifer Sciubba
Seth Center	Frank Gavin	Maria Langan-Riekhof	Erin Sikorsky
Victor Cha	Matthew Goodman	Reta Jo Lewis	Sheila Smith
Samuel Charap	Sherri Goodman	Doug Lute	Tobias Switzer
James Cheney	Michael Green	Kelly Magsamen	Nicholas Szechenyi
Derek Chollet	Naima Green-Riley	Eric McQueen	Troy Thomas
John Conger	Rebecca Hersman	Joseph Militano	Pooja Virkar
Heather Conley	Kathleen Hicks	Siddharth Mohandas	Leigh Warner
Zack Cooper	Angie Hidalgo	Joseph Moyo	Caitlin Welsh
Sheba Crocker	Frank Hoffman	Joseph Nye	Stephen Hedger

Appendix B

Scenarios

Pivot Point: Taiwan 2025 Scenario

- Two weeks ago, the People's Republic of China blockaded the island of Taiwan in an attempt to force reunification, stating that any intervention by an outside party would be viewed as an act of war.
- The United States and Japan have issued strong statements of support for Taiwan, and the United States has sent a second carrier strike group to the region, alongside allies, with U.S. Indo-Pacific Command forces preparing for a possible contingency operation.
- China is using hard- and soft-power tactics throughout the region and internationally to try to disrupt any organized political or other resistance to its actions.

DATELINE: May 2, 2025

Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) forces have blockaded the island of Taiwan through deployment of naval and air elements that now control the waters and airspace of the country. China has also increased the concentration of anti-access and area denial capabilities in the area, along with amphibious assault and other follow-on forces. The U.S. Intelligence Community assesses that China only intends to use these forces in the event of an escalation in the conflict on the part of Taiwan or outside powers.

Yesterday, on the 75th Anniversary of the end of the Chinese Civil War, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China declared full sovereignty and jurisdiction over the island in an official statement:

China is asserting its natural sovereign rights over territory internationally recognized as within our jurisdiction. This is a domestic matter, and we

will not tolerate external interference in the reunification of the Chinese people. Any attempted interference in China's sovereignty will be met with a forceful economic and military response.

Two weeks ago, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) rapidly established a cordon around Taiwan to "enforce the uniform application of Chinese customs policy" and redirect all Formosa-bound commerce through "proper customs authorities" at the mainland port of Fuzhou. Chinese diplomats have issued demarches to all countries with official or unofficial representation in Taiwan that they must close down these unauthorized interactions and correct their relationships in accordance with Beijing's sovereignty and authority over Taiwan or suffer trade and investment consequences.

At the onset of the conflict, the Taiwanese Naval Fleet moved quickly to the Pacific Ocean out of range of Chinese missiles, anticipating that destruction of Taiwan's runways would render the Taiwan air force unable to protect them. Even if rapid-repair and dispersal/disguise methods prove effective, the air force lacks stealth capability to counter China's mass-produced J-31 stealth fighter jets. Taiwanese forces overall have ameliorated the ammunition and parts shortages publicized by the investigation into a 2020 military suicide and improved mission capability of its major combat platforms from 30 to 75 percent.³⁹ The overall readiness of the Taiwanese army remains a problem area, but brigades deployed on the outskirts of major cities and the northern end of Taiwan are mission ready.

To enforce the blockade, all four of China's now-commissioned aircraft carriers have entered Taiwan's territorial waters to protect amphibious assets and conduct escort/ID air operations through the newly announced Chinese Taipei Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). The operational capability of the carriers is unproven, but they are a powerful show of force in the region. Since the announcement of an ADIZ, almost all commercial flights to and from the island have been suspended, save for Chinese airlines and a few whose countries never had relations with Taiwan. According to U.S. and Australian naval intelligence, the PLA has deployed additional anti-ship missiles and surface-to-air missiles along the strait and mobilized reserves to protect other long-range weapons and deployment of law enforcement personnel to the island. Intelligence reports indicate that DF-21 capacity has been layered onto Chinese defenses so as to threaten any carrier battle groups that enter the first island chain.

Since 2020, there has been no official change in U.S. commitment to the defense of Taiwan; strategic ambiguity remains. However, the U.S. Congress has continued to authorize more advanced arms sales, including as-yet-undelivered fifth-generation fighter jets and anti-ship missiles. Congress has repeatedly drafted, but never passed, an Authorization for the Use of Military Force in the event of a Chinese attack on Taiwan. However, emergency hearings in both houses have been scheduled to consider its passage this week.

REGIONAL CONTEXT

Beijing began its campaign to bring Taiwan fully under its control in early 2023, threatening sanctions on Taiwanese business interests on the mainland if Taiwan did not take concrete steps toward reunification. After Taipei refused, Beijing seized Taiwanese business assets on the mainland. This was an immediate blow to Taiwan's economy, but proved the wisdom of Tsai Ing-Wen's 2016 reshoring effort. The Taiwanese economy succeeded in shifting considerable trade over the past several years from the mainland to the United States, Japan, and ASEAN states.⁴⁰

Leading up to the current crisis, Xi Jinping's government exerted steadily increasing military and paramilitary pressure on neighboring countries with which it contests maritime territory. In the past several months Chinese naval vessels collided with and sunk a Filipino fishing ship and a Vietnamese patrol boat after tense standoffs in the Scarborough Shoal and just west of the Spratly Islands, respectively. China also had been slowly building artificial islands and authorizing a growing number of Chinese coast guard activities in the two administrative districts it created along the Paracel and Spratly Islands chains in 2020.

Japanese diplomats have loudly objected to the repeated entry of Chinese paramilitary naval militia ships through the Senkaku Islands in recent months, which recently damaged a Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force destroyer during an unsafe maneuver and incident at sea. The resulting diplomatic tension was made more acute by Chinese police arresting and detaining four prominent Japanese national business executives residing in China on specious charges of espionage. After close consultations between Tokyo and Washington, the Japanese Foreign Ministry issued an unequivocal condemnation of coercive reunification within an hour of the United States' own statement. In response, Chinese aircraft overflew the strait between Miyako and Okinawa, conducted air drills in close proximity to the Senkaku Islands, and test-launched without notice two DF-21 missiles directly over a U.S. 7th Fleet carrier strike group including the USS *Ronald Reagan*.

INDO-PACIFIC POSTURE

U.S. military force posture and investment in the Indo-Pacific have been steadily increasing in line with the FY 2022 budget allocation toward an Indo-Pacific Deterrence Initiative, resulting in a more dispersed, joint rotating forward-deployed presence based on prepositioned and decentralized clusters of resources and enhanced surge capacity. Marine Expeditionary Advance Bases have been emplaced on several islands within the first chain to assist in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and targeting long-range cruise missile and air defense systems. The U.S. Navy's Pacific Fleet has increased its freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) and exercises with Asian allies and partners in preparation to support a contingency within the second island chain. However, crucial investments in Guam (persistent integrated air defense system and space-based persistent radar system) will not be operational until 2026.⁴¹ The USS Theodore Roosevelt carrier strike group has arrived in the Indo-Pacific theater and remains stationed just beyond the first island chain.

In recent years, NATO member country navies have increased steadily the number of FONOPs in the disputed areas of the South and East China Seas, and several countries have warships in theater now operating near U.S. forces. Australian and Japanese naval forces have also increased their presence inside the second island chain.

Over the past decade, Japan has expanded its Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) units and facilities across the southern islands of Yonaguni, Amami Oshima, Miyakojima, and Ishigaki as part of its "Southwest Island Defense" posture.⁴² The Naha, Okinawa Air Self-Defense Force Base now has two runways to accommodate increased air operations, and new GSDF units have been activated in the past two years on both Okinawa main island and Ishigaki.

The Republic of Korea (ROK) has also invested heavily in defense over the past five years, acquiring F-35A stealth fighter jets and both tactical and long-range surface-to-surface missiles. However,

its new light aircraft carriers are not ready for deployment.⁴³ While diplomatic relations between Japan and the ROK are still frosty, the two countries' intelligence and military communities have re-engaged in the face of a worsening threat from China—for example, by reactivating the General Military Information Sharing Agreement (GSOMIA) and continuing participation with the United States and Australia in regular Pacific Vanguard exercises off the coast of Guam.⁴⁴

Australia has fielded new naval capabilities to support its Pacific Step-Up strategy, as announced in the 2020 Defense White Paper update.⁴⁵ The first few Attack-class submarines have been deployed into the first island chain, along with remotely-piloted aircraft and an advanced strike system to hold Chinese forces at risk.

ASEAN remains divided on how to respond to China's actions. A growing topic of concern throughout the Indo-Pacific region has been increased pro-Beijing mobilization and political agitation, especially in Malaysia and Australia, as the United Front reacts to sympathy for Taiwan. The current president of the Philippines has messaged clear commitment to defending Filipino territorial rights from Chinese incursions, particularly the Scarborough Shoal and Mischief Reef in the South China Sea, and the State Department expects the Filipino government to be an essential conduit of diplomacy with the other ASEAN nations.

TAIWAN'S POLITICS

In Taiwan, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) controls the presidency and Legislative Yuan, led by a protégé of Tsai Ing-Wen. The DPP has refrained from talk of independence or challenging the 1992 Consensus. However, it has become more active in framing itself as the democratic hope of the Chinese people. The Taiwanese government has invested heavily in public diplomacy, imitating and countering the Chinese Communist Party's United Front efforts abroad through a coordinated media campaign that provides an alternative Chinese language narrative in print and television. Recent polls show significant inroads for pro-Taiwanese democracy among the Chinese diaspora, a trend that may have contributed to Beijing's decision to reunify by force this year.

Underlining this point, the past year has seen 850,000 residents flee Hong Kong to seek asylum in Taiwan after several years of increasing oppression and retaliation against participants in the pro-democracy movement. Their presence—and their much-publicized testimony of abusive measures inflicted by Beijing on their once democratic territory—have hardened Taiwanese popular opinion against reunification and emphasized to other democratic nations the importance of Taiwan's position as the front line against authoritarianism. Despite strong objections from Beijing, several major European countries have agreed to share the burden of resettling Hong Kongers, including the United Kingdom, France, Norway, Finland, Belgium, and the Baltic States. Japan has provided significant financial support to help shepherd the Hong Kong people through their emigration.

The United States, along with its allies and partners, is challenged to impose costs on a powerful China whose interest in reunification with Taiwan may be too strong to deter. There are, however, opportunities to mitigate the impact on Taiwanese people and to leverage this moment as an impetus to unify the liberal democratic world.

Last Chance: 2030 Climate Change Scenario

- The United States is coping with the consequences of a thousand-year drought—one of multiple ongoing climate-linked environmental catastrophes driving food insecurity, mass migration, and growing political instability globally.
- Two million people are living in migrant camps along the U.S.-Mexico border; the security and humanitarian situation is dire, and non-state factions are effectively in control of much of northern Mexico.
- Americans have little appetite for immigration or multilateralism, demanding economic aid, disaster relief, and relocation support.

DATELINE: September 30, 2030

The United States has just endured its third summer of a thousand-year drought attributed to global climate change. Unfortunately, this is only one of multiple, ongoing global environmental disasters that combined have displaced more than 300 million people on three continents over the last decade.⁴⁶ Twenty-five million migrants have streamed toward the United States over the past 10 years, some managing to cross the border undocumented and work for some time before being deported, but 2 million of them have accumulated within miles of the U.S. border in a network of semi-permanent, slum-like refugee camps. Community leadership has emerged to govern the border region, as the Mexican state has largely abdicated control of large parts of the north of the country to organized crime syndicates.

FOOD SECURITY

The three-year drought has crippled food production in the Great Plains region of the United States, and years of aquifer overexploitation have reduced the capacity of groundwater to compensate for the effects. As a result, U.S. wheat producers—the third-largest exporters in the world—saw declines of 33 percent in the first year of drought, 36 percent in the second, and a further 24 percent in the third. The United States has almost exhausted its wheat reserves and has reduced its exports to maintain food security. Meanwhile, other breadbasket regions have struggled to fill the production gap, leading to a global decline in staple reserves, a sharp increase in the price and volatility of all agricultural commodities, and a series of trade disputes as countries seek to secure new sources of food supply. Experts predict that another two years of drought could lead to historic, widespread famine in developing countries as reserves are further depleted.

The U.S. federal government has mitigated the immediate ongoing food supply chain disruption by tapping into emergency funding across the government and buying up supplies wherever it can globally. All tariffs on food imports have been suspended, and there is a temporary prohibition on all grain exports.⁴⁷ Other major countries have done similarly, leveraging all diplomatic angles—and, in the case of China, country debt owed as well—to secure food supplies.

High and volatile food prices have dampened global economic growth and threatened government finances and legitimacy in various parts of the developing world, including the increasingly fragile and ungoverned northern regions of Mexico. Due to elevated food prices, China is experiencing the largest-scale protests in its modern history.

NATURAL DISASTERS

The various climate accords and treaties agreed to over the past 30 years have proved unenforceable, doing little to slow global temperature rise and related climate volatility. Since 2020, the sea level has risen by six inches, generating over \$750 billion in cumulative damages to coastal properties from storm surges alone in the United States. It has devastated fisheries, tourism, and other coastal industries in many states.⁴⁸ After repeated extreme climate events, several coastal and southern states (including Oregon, Arizona, Louisiana, and Florida) are experiencing mounting debt crises and population outflows, with public finances decimated by state-backed insurance guarantees after repeated and historic flooding, storms, and wildfires. The effects on the nation's overall aging infrastructure are devastating, creating a compounding negative effect on transportation and economic growth.

Similar crises all over the world are exacerbating the massive flows of economic and climate migration toward developed countries. Debate rages in the United States and allied capitals about how or whether to absorb the tens of millions of refugees, while long-term migrant camps and detention facilities stack up along their borders. The 2 million-strong migrant community living in semi-permanent camps along the U.S.-Mexico border has organized a leadership council to govern the area they inhabit and pursue their interests in a context of contested sovereignty between the Mexican government and the increasingly influential transnational organized crime syndicates, as described later in the briefing.

Concurrent with the crisis on land, pressures on ocean ecosystems have dramatically collapsed fishing stocks. This has led to famine and unemployment in Southeast Asia and the Caribbean and further increases in the cost of food among the key importing developed countries.⁴⁹ With fishing stocks concentrated in increasingly remote waters worldwide, violent skirmishes are now commonplace among fishing fleets, especially near Arctic waters where species are increasingly migrating. Increasing numbers of fishing crews supplement their income with piracy or human smuggling.⁵⁰ The U.S. Coast Guard and Navy are spending significantly more operational time focused exclusively on the mission of combatting illegal fishing and protecting U.S. ships in contested waters.

INTERNAL AND BUDGETARY CRISES

Meanwhile, the United States and its allies are struggling to address internal environmental and budgetary crises brought about by extreme weather events, fires, and the beginnings of a relocation movement from coastal communities. The mass migration threatens to overwhelm the housing market and infrastructure in northern, interior “climate haven” cities such as Denver, Duluth, and Buffalo.⁵¹

An increasing share of the U.S. defense budget, about \$50 billion annually, is now consumed by climate mitigation and disaster repair.⁵² Major military installations in Virginia, South Carolina, and Florida have become inoperable, as high tides left bases flooded and regularly resulted in multi-billion-dollar damage.⁵³ This has resulted in a major shift of operational facilities northward, where coastal inundation has been more limited and well mitigated.⁵⁴

Before the macroeconomic supply shock associated with the loss of U.S. staple food harvests, the global economy had consolidated its recovery from the 2020–2021 pandemic, with hydrocarbons being used again in similar quantities as prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Governments have been eager to propel economic growth in order to pay off the debts from pandemic stimulus and mitigation measures. Apart from a

European carbon adjustment border tax hike that proved quite disruptive to international trade, there has been little political appetite for climate change measures that constrain economic growth.

The poverty rate in the United States due to the Covid-19 pandemic has stabilized from its 2020–2023 highs of 14 to 15 percent down to 10 percent. However, pandemic mitigation through 2021, stimulus to boost a restarting economy, and an average of \$300 billion per year in natural disaster relief have pushed the U.S. debt-to-GDP ratio from roughly 100 percent in 2020 to 130 percent in 2030, leading some to wonder whether a historic default on U.S. debt is possible and calling into question the dominant role of the dollar as a reserve currency.

The economic situation has led to increasing popularity of movements and political candidates in favor of radical redistribution of wealth, though these movements are internally divided among those who also favor resettlement of refugees in the United States and those who do not. The debate is similar in European capitals, where domestic politics make it difficult to negotiate an equitable formula to manage global migratory pressures.

In total, there are 300 million refugees permanently displaced within developing countries from areas afflicted by coastal flooding/storms, droughts, fires, and uninhabitable hot climate zones, accumulating in migrant camps across South and Southeast Asia, East Africa, Central America, and the Mediterranean.⁵⁵

UNGOVERNED BORDER

Despite the dire circumstances, authoritative community leadership has emerged among the mostly Spanish-speaking inhabitants of the border region camps. Originating in Consuelo—the largest migrant camp—Fuerza de Consuelo (FDC) claims to speak for the migrants’ interests while protecting them from, and managing relationships with, the organized crime syndicates that maintain control over the informal economies of the migrants and human trafficking into the United States.⁵⁶ Foremost among these is a diversified and heavily militarized Sinaloa cartel. Until now, the United States depended on the Mexican government for support managing migration and combating the black-market trade in narcotics and weaponry. However, Mexican central authorities have withdrawn from the border area, leaving the FDC to govern itself. Navigating among two powerful non-state actors and a teetering federal government in Mexico will be key to avoiding the worst-case scenario: a failed, ungoverned territory along the United States’ 2,000-mile border.

SUMMARY

The U.S. president and Congress have a complex crisis agenda to contend with: (1) economic aid for Americans affected by drought, extreme weather events, food insecurity, and relocation stressors; (2) the global drawdown in staple food reserves leading to commodity price volatility and risk of famine throughout the developing world; (3) a long-term solution for the 2 million migrants in camps along the 2,000-mile barely-governed border region; and (4) a plan to enforce maritime law and order to preserve freedom of navigation and sea trade.

Crossing Lines: Russia 2024–2025 Scenario

- Russian cyberattacks on state voter rolls during the 2024 U.S. election result in a U.S. cyber response targeting Russian computer networks linked to the attacks.

- Russia then retaliates with space-based and undersea attacks on U.S. military reconnaissance and communications infrastructure.
- Russia maintains public ambiguity about its role in both attacks and warns the United States against any further response, seemingly prepared to escalate the conflict.

DATELINE: February 2025

Russian interference in the mechanics of the 2024 U.S. election has led to an escalating conflict just short of war. Prior to the election, the White House and State Department and Pentagon officials repeatedly messaged in public and private that the United States would consider any direct interference in the election process as equivalent to an attack on critical infrastructure and an act of war that would be met with a proportional response. The secretary of defense stated in a press conference two days prior to the 2024 U.S. presidential election:

The president has asked us for a range of response options should any foreign power interfere in our election system. Hear this around the globe: we are vigilant, and the United States will consider any attempted interference in our election system and process to be an act of aggression against our country. It will be met with a proportional response. Make no mistake: our response will be decisive and equally damaging to the aggressor. Those who seek to harm the core institutions of our country and our way of life should know that such an attack will be met with resistance and response.

Despite these warnings, a Russian-GRU-affiliated (Main Intelligence Directorate) hacker group infiltrated the networks of U.S. state and local government officials and scrambled the files containing voter rolls in critical districts in the swing states of Ohio, Florida, Arizona, and Michigan. This led to long lines on election day and deterred many voters as the precincts struggled to process everyone through provisional ballots. It threw election results into chaos for several weeks as states worked through the paper ballots and legal suits were filed on behalf of candidates.⁵⁷ Despite the delay, a presidential victor was declared in time for the 2025 inauguration. A peaceful transition of power occurred.

Russian operations have also been linked to American lives lost in the chaotic post-election weeks. Twenty Americans were killed, and hundreds injured, in a series of protests and counter-protests across the country related to the elections, with Russian online disinformation actors found to be stoking violence by fringe groups on both sides. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS), working in collaboration with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National Security Agency (NSA), was able to attribute with a high degree of confidence the cyberattack and subsequent disinformation campaign to Russian state actors.

With Congress moving quickly to confirm a new cabinet and key diplomatic postings, the new U.S. ambassador to NATO formally requested that NATO invoke Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. Despite overall strong support, there was resistance among some smaller member countries whose governments are increasingly influenced by Moscow. Some cited broadly circulating disinformation regarding the attack as reason for declining to support the measure. At the last moment, the United States withdrew its request, settling for a strong statement of support from key allies instead. The Kremlin and Russian diplomats broadly dismissed U.S. accusations. In a quote carried on ITAR-TASS,

Russian President Vladimir Putin chided, “This is more hysteria. Again, the United States blames its own societal decay on Russia, just like 2016 and 2020.”

U.S. RESPONSE

Upon the release of the joint DHS-FBI-NSA report attributing the attack to Russia, the newly inaugurated president authorized U.S. Cyber Command to execute a carefully planned offensive counterforce operation targeting Russian GRU facilities linked to funding, training, and executing the attack on the U.S. election. This attack rendered thousands of unclassified and classified GRU computer systems, including a large data storage center, permanently inoperable. Intelligence reports indicate considerable anxiety within the Russian government about not just the intelligence and data lost but also whether exfiltration occurred beforehand, not to mention the reliability and potential compromise of what remains. The impact of the operation on Russian cyber capabilities has been compared to the 2016–2017 Shadow Brokers leak of NSA sources and methods.⁵⁸ Though U.S. officials do not officially acknowledge the operation, Pentagon officials speak on background with multiple news outlets to lay out their legal case for the proportionality of the response in line with the laws of armed conflict.

RUSSIAN RETALIATION

Russia retaliated a week later, damaging U.S. submarine cables and U.S. reconnaissance and communications satellites supporting USEUCOM, USNORTHCOM, and NORAD. Russia’s military used remotely operated undersea vehicles as well as ground-based and space-based jamming, dazzling, and maneuverable satellites to conduct the multi-domain attack. While some damage to U.S. assets is reversible, some proves permanent, reducing U.S. operational capabilities across a broad geography and causing a cascade of disruption to commercial interests reliant on the underseas cables and global positioning, navigation, and timing systems. U.S. airbases at Thule, Greenland and Eielson, Alaska are especially affected and thought to be the likely primary targets of the attack. U.S. Strategic Command assesses limited impact on nuclear command and control capabilities (NC3) and missile defense in the region, and it is unclear whether the attack intended to impair or degrade U.S. NC3 or missile defenses. Following the attack Russia’s foreign minister said:

We do not know why the United States would again blame Russia for its own problems. With so many enemies that it has created around the world from its reckless behavior, why always point the finger at Russia? We can say that, as always, the Russian Federation remains prepared with all available options to respond to any aggression against our homeland and interests.

Russia, the United States, and NATO members have placed their forces on the highest state of alert. The United States mobilized additional air, ground, and naval forces to the EUCOM AOR, while Russia has reinforced its eastern border and increased its naval presence.

Beijing has been silent on events in the United States but issues a particularly strongly worded statement about the U.S. cyberattack on Russian infrastructure. President Xi Jinping is quoted across multiple official state media outlets as saying, “The United States has crossed a redline in sovereignty by attacking Russia’s networks. All nations must stand against this action, and China will aid Russia in its recovery.”

RUSSIAN DOMESTIC SITUATION

Remaining pretenses of democracy inside Vladimir Putin's Russia are fading by 2020. Amendments to the constitution have passed overwhelmingly in a largely rigged referendum, paving the way for Putin's easy reelection to the presidency in spring 2024, with the potential to remain in office until 2036. The United Russia Party has won an ever-increasing share of the vote thereafter, with elections reduced to theater.

At the same time, Putin's relative power has fragmented as competing factions grow within the party and related business interests. The hardline nationalist faction is ascendant, and Putin in some ways now serves as a bulwark against their more extreme tendencies. There is a fear among some leading U.S. and European Russia analysts that any more confrontational stance toward Russia could lead to Putin's marginalization and further concentration of power by this shadowy element.

The confirmed poisoning of opposition leader Alexei Navalny in summer 2020 with a Novichok nerve agent that only could have come from an official Russian state stockpile indicated then that the Kremlin's usual tolerance for a limited, legitimate opposition was waning as the regime felt increasingly insecure. In the years that follow, more and more opposition organizers, sympathetic journalists, and others were intimidated or silenced with repressive legislation and state takeovers of private companies.

The year 2020 also had marked a new level of discontent with Putin. Following a brief rebound, his approval ratings once again slumped in 2021 as the economic aftershocks of the coronavirus pandemic and the continued low price of oil were felt most acutely in the Russian hinterland—a traditional base of support for Putin. Grievances range from socioeconomic issues to state mismanagement of resurgent, local spikes in coronavirus, driving some of the largest protests in decades in the country's Arctic and Far East, where urban decay resulting from melting permafrost and raging wildfires in Siberia also contribute to a climate of malaise. The constituency for these protests is broad: young and old, blue collar and, in the liberal leaning cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg, white collar. Isolated protests continue over the years that follow, but the absence of a unified opposition movement fails to translate these protests into political change at even the local level. Russian authorities continue to adapt Chinese-supplied surveillance technology to monitor political organizers and pass laws banning encrypted communication and effectively requiring spyware be installed on all electronic devices sold inside Russia.

Russia's economy is mired in a low for years after the Covid-19 pandemic, with oil just barely hovering above the \$40/barrel price needed to balance its national budget and increasingly strict carbon standards in the European Union and beyond dampening foreign investment in the Russian energy sector. Spending on the politically important \$400 billion National Projects is continuously delayed and fails to reignite economic growth. Russia's massive foreign reserves dwindle as the Kremlin attempts to offset the political repercussions of a sputtering economy with increased social spending. China has become increasingly the lender of first resort for Russia.

RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Russian foreign policy has remained that of a global opportunist, undermining U.S. and European interests and advancing its own wherever the opportunity presents while demanding to be treated as a great power. As noted, a new hardline faction is pushing President Putin to increase Russia's activities abroad and to more directly confront the United States and break the transatlantic alliance.

The United States layers on new sanctions in response to the latest violation of international laws and norms by Russia, but Russian behavior is largely unchanged. Russia has continued to back teetering autocratic regimes from Caracas to Damascus, Minsk to Bangui, increasingly through the use of professional military contractors. Russia's global gray zone activities intensify in other ways as well, notably its efforts to leverage "active measures" information campaigns inside Western democracies, amplifying political divisions in a fractious post-Covid landscape.

Europe's relations with Russia continue to deteriorate, though not to the extent of those of the United States. Russia continues to make inroads in some smaller European countries through influence campaigns and support of populist regimes. Overall European sanctions and other pressures largely hold due to continued, blatant Russian transgressions and lack of willingness to engage in reform or dialogue. Nonetheless, collective action against Russia within the European Union and NATO is complicated by continued Russian and to a lesser extent Chinese influence.

Russia's relations with China remain close during this time, especially as Russia seeks access to China's growing technology base to compensate for its own decline. China is also now the largest foreign investor in Russia, with most funds targeting its energy sector and other resources. Russia continues to court Japan, India, and others to try to somewhat offset its growing dependence on China and to diversify relations away from the West, but these relations remain limited and have diminished alongside growing Russian provocations during this period.

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