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TASK FORCE REPORT

Preventing Nuclear Proliferation and Reassuring America's Allies

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Report from the Task Force on US Allies and Nuclear Weapons Proliferation

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Acknowledgments

The Council is grateful to the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation for the generous financial support that made this report possible, Brian Hanson for conceptualizing the project, and to Lily Wojtowicz and Brian Steiner for research support.

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs is an independent, nonpartisan organization. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in this report are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs or of the project funders.

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Executive Summary

In recent decades, the threat of nuclear proliferation has emanated primarily from the Middle East and from south and northeast Asia. But the proliferation threat wasn't always concentrated in these regions. Long before countries like North Korea and Iran topped the list of nuclear threats, leaders in Washington and elsewhere worried about a different group of countries—America's allies in Europe and Asia. Indeed, in the early 1960s, intelligence officials projected that by the mid-1970s there likely would be 10 to 15 nuclear powers in the world within a decade, as countries like Australia, Germany, Italy, Japan, South Korea, and Turkey would opt to join a growing nuclear club.

The nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) of 1968 was designed to prevent this, and it did. But it succeeded in large part because of a concerted US effort since the 1960s to reassure its allies around the world that America's nuclear umbrella would extend to their territory and ensure their security. Rather than developing their own national nuclear capabilities, key allies in Europe and Asia opted to rely on the US nuclear guarantee instead. Since the NPT entered into force in 1970, just four countries (India, Israel, Pakistan, and North Korea) have acquired nuclear weapons.

More recently, however, questions about the credibility of the American nuclear guarantee have arisen again in Europe and Asia. Allies in both regions confront growing military threats from a resurgent Russia, a rising China, and a nuclear North Korea. At the same time, successive US administrations have sought to retreat from some longstanding commitments, leaving America's allies around the world uncertain whether they can still rely on the United States for their defense and security—nuclear and otherwise. So far, the discussions about nuclear deterrence and reassurance have played out largely beyond public view. But the issue is becoming increasingly salient, given growing threats from Russia and China especially, and growing doubts about the United States. America and its allies cannot ignore this new reality. For if we are to prevent new nuclear proliferation among these allies, it is essential to acknowledge that what has long been unthinkable is becoming thinkable once more.

Although the Biden administration has pledged to reaffirm long-standing US security commitments to its allies, a change in administration alone is unlikely to suffice in reestablishing the credibility of the US security guarantee, including the nuclear umbrella, in the eyes of most allies. Trust has been broken, and it will take more than a simple return to business as usual to reassure allies of America's commitments. If Washington is to reestablish its credibility, it will take time and great effort on the part of both the United States and its allies to rebuild confidence in their joint framework for collective defense.

The United States will have to take the lead in rebuilding trust and confidence in its security commitments—including the nuclear guarantee. It will have to demonstrate that commitment in new and evident ways and work closely and collaboratively with its allies in Europe and Asia to renew their collective defense framework, including especially its long-neglected but increasingly important nuclear dimension. At the same time, allies will need to do their part to help rebuild the relationships with Washington and among themselves to strengthen overall deterrence and make US reassurance more credible and convincing. And all of the allies will need to commit to rethinking the arms control framework, nuclear and conventional, that should guide relations between the United States, Russia, China, and key Asian and European powers.

To that end, we make the following recommendations:

Rebuilding US Leadership

There are three major steps the United States can take to rebuild confidence in the US security commitments to its allies, including recommitting to extended nuclear deterrence.

- The president of the United States should reaffirm the foundational cornerstones of America's security commitments, including reaffirming its treaty-based collective defense commitments unequivocally, reversing the decision to remove US troops from Germany and elsewhere, and negotiating long-term, balanced cost-sharing arrangements for US forces based in Europe and Asia.
- The United States needs to proactively raise the salience of nuclear weapons issues in its alliance relations, including by bringing allies into the nuclear planning process from the outset, increasing alliance crisis- management exercises, and involving alliance leaders at the highest level in regular wargaming.
- The United States needs to take steps to bolster the deterrence and defense capabilities of the European and Asian alliances, including increasing conventional defense capabilities in Europe and Asia, deploying additional missile defense capabilities, and, if needed, reviewing its nonstrategic nuclear weapons posture in consultations with allies to assure the adequacy of its forward-based systems and commitments.

Strengthening European Defense Capabilities

There is a pressing need to rebalance the transatlantic partnership.

- Europe needs to take more responsibility for its own defense and security, and the United States needs to actively encourage and promote European defense and security cooperation and autonomy.
- European defense cooperation needs to focus on real military capabilities, not just more processes, including by fulfilling existing commitments to make real investments to improve warfighting capabilities and enhancing overall readiness and the rapid deployability of European forces.
- Europe needs to build up the nuclear dimension of its defense efforts, including by retaining and modernizing capabilities for existing NATO nuclear missions and by France and Britain working together to extend their nuclear deterrents to their European allies.

Multilateral Deterrence in Asia

With Asia increasingly seen in Washington as the primary strategic and geopolitical theater of its global engagements, it is increasingly critical for the United States and its principal allies to coordinate strategy and combine efforts.

- The United States should prioritize reestablishing strong trilateral security cooperation with Japan and South Korea, which is a prerequisite both to address the North Korean threat and to build a multilateral security framework within Asia as a whole.

- The United States should create an Asian Nuclear Planning Group, bringing Australia, Japan, and South Korea into the US nuclear planning processes and providing a platform for these allies to discuss specific policies associated with US nuclear forces.
- The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue partners should give consideration to how they would handle a request for the eventual inclusion of South Korea in their dialogue.

Multilateral Arms Control

The biggest nuclear unknown is the scope and eventual scale of the Chinese nuclear deterrent forces. The United States and its allies have a powerful incentive to penetrate China's nuclear opacity and get a greater insight into its capabilities. Arms control can play a role in this effort, providing greater transparency about capabilities, an exchange of views on intentions, and enhanced stability in the overall nuclear relationship. An expanded arms control framework should include a multipronged effort.

- Following the extension of New START, the United States and Russia should negotiate a new bilateral arms control agreement. Such a new agreement could cover all nuclear warheads, including those in storage, as well as novel nuclear delivery systems, and provide crucial reassurance to America's allies.
- The five permanent members of the UN Security Council (P5) should engage in a strategic dialogue on nuclear weapons issues, including a dialogue on strategic stability, the role of nuclear weapons, the relationship between offense and defense, the impact of new technologies, and other critical strategic issues.
- The P5 should negotiate nuclear confidence-building and transparency measures, which could include as a first step invitations by the United States and Russia to representatives of the other nuclear powers to observe inspections that both countries conduct as part of existing arms control obligations.
- Efforts to multilateralize nuclear arms control should place particular emphasis on engaging China, which could include engaging China in a dialogue akin to the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks and allowing China to participate in New START monitoring as first steps, with the ultimate goal to agree on force limitations at the lowest possible level for each country.

Conclusion

For more than 50 years, America's security alliances have been critical to ensuring the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons. By extending the nuclear umbrella to defend its allies in Europe and Asia, the United States ensured their security against nuclear attack and intimidation and removed any perceived need on their part to acquire a nuclear capability. However, the security climate confronting allies is changing rapidly, as Russia moves aggressively to exert its influence, China grows ever bolder and more ambitious in its global reach, North Korea expands its growing nuclear and missile capabilities, and a politically divided America raises questions about the future of its global engagement. Confronted with these changing circumstances, US allies face growing uncertainty about the long-term viability of their alliances with the United States and are beginning to assess the possibility of alternative security arrangements, including regarding the nuclear dimension.

The Biden administration has made rebuilding America's alliances a fundamental priority from the moment it takes office. Reaffirming collective defense commitments in Europe and Asia is a necessary and welcome step. But it will take more than presidential words to rebuild alliances. It will require transforming relationships in more fundamental ways—including bolstering deterrence and defense capabilities all around, bringing European and Asian allies into US nuclear planning processes, and expanding arms control efforts that involve not just Russia but also, and especially, China. This is hardly an impossible agenda; but its urgency is underscored by the reality that without rebuilding the alliance structures that have provided the foundation of security in Europe and Asia, the question of nuclear proliferation among allies could once again emerge on the agenda.

Introduction

It's 2030. New seismic activity indicates an underground nuclear explosion originating near the Arctic Circle. Yet one more country has announced it is joining the growing group of nuclear weapons states, which now consists of 20 nations—more than double the number just ten years ago. In 2023, a group of former US allies renounced their adherence to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and opted to acquire the very nuclear capabilities they had foresworn decades earlier. Ever since, nations across the world have raced to acquire the bomb, and the global security situation has become increasingly precarious. As centers of nuclear decision making multiplied, one of these weapons was bound to go off, with consequences incalculable for all.

Far-fetched? Perhaps, but this scenario is more plausible now than many may think. In 1963, US President John F. Kennedy warned about a proliferated world appearing within a decade. US and other intelligence services estimated that the trend would accelerate. Of course, that didn't happen. Having stood at the brink of nuclear war during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the United States and the Soviet Union redoubled efforts to stabilize their nuclear relationship and prevent the further proliferation of nuclear weapons. The signing of the NPT in 1968 and its entry into force two years later were central elements in these efforts. Since then, just four additional countries—India, Israel, Pakistan, and North Korea—have acquired nuclear weapons.

A critical element of the NPT regime's success was the concerted US effort in the 1960s and beyond to reassure its allies around the world that America's nuclear umbrella would extend to their territory and ensure their security. Rather than developing their own national nuclear capabilities, key allies like Australia, Germany, Italy, Japan, South Korea, and Turkey opted to rely on the US nuclear guarantee instead. Washington sought to strengthen the credibility of its nuclear commitment by developing nuclear-sharing arrangements in NATO and deploying nuclear-capable systems in Europe and Asia. And whenever new developments seemed to call the US nuclear guarantee into question (including the Soviet deployment of a new generation of medium-range missiles in Europe and North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles), Washington worked to reassure its allies that the nuclear guarantee remained strong and credible. As a result, the NPT regime not only survived, but its members unanimously agreed in 1995 to extend the treaty indefinitely.

New Security Challenges

With the end of the Cold War, concerns about nuclear deterrence and the US nuclear guarantee that had dominated Washington's relations with its allies in Europe and Asia receded into the background. Thousands of nuclear weapons deployed on allied territory were withdrawn as the focus shifted to negotiating deep arms reductions and improved political relations with erstwhile adversaries.

More recently, however, questions about the credibility of the American nuclear guarantee have once again arisen in Europe and Asia. In both regions, allies confront growing military threats from a resurgent Russia, a rising China, and a nuclear North Korea. At the same time, successive American administrations have sought to retreat from some longstanding commitments, leaving allies around the world uncertain whether they can still rely on the United States for their defense and security—nuclear and otherwise.

For the past two decades, Russian President Vladimir Putin has singularly focused on regaining Russia's superpower status. He has embarked on a systematic challenge to the West, designed to weaken the bonds between and among the United States and Europe and strengthen Russia's strategic position both in its immediate neighborhood and increasingly beyond. Putin has undertaken a major military modernization designed to intimidate neighbors and weaken NATO. That includes not only significant improvements in conventional forces but also a demonstrated willingness to use them in Europe and beyond. Moscow also has made significant investments in new nuclear forces capable of striking targets far and near, including deploying nuclear-capable Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad and other parts of western Russia and fielding new, medium-range, ground-launched cruise missiles in clear violation of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty. Finally, Russia appears to have integrated its nonstrategic nuclear forces into its war-fighting strategy, making its nuclear threats and exercises especially worrisome to neighboring countries.

In Asia, meanwhile, four decades of unrelenting economic growth and expansion have fueled China's rise as the most powerful country in the region and, ultimately, a peer competitor of the United States. By 2017, President Xi Jinping openly declared the arrival of a "new era" in which China would take "center stage." An ambitious, trillion-dollar infrastructure investment has extended China's reach and influence across south and central Asia to Europe and North Africa. Additional large investments in Africa and Latin America have opened new markets for China and created new dependencies. With decades of double-digit growth in defense spending, China has built a conventional military force that is second in size and capability only to the United States—and increasingly dominant within Asia itself. Long focused on territorial defense, China now projects military power well beyond its shores, creating an intimidating presence in the Taiwan Straits and the disputed island chains of the South China Sea, opening its first foreign military base in Djibouti, and conducting naval exercises with Russia in the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, and the Baltic Sea. And while it was the last major power to join the nuclear club and long relied on a minimal deterrent, Beijing has more recently accelerated the [modernization](#) of its nuclear forces, "fielding more types and greater numbers of nuclear weapons than ever before." Although overall nuclear force levels remain modest, with about 300 deployed warheads, there are indications that Beijing could deploy significantly greater numbers if it chose to do so. Indeed, the US Defense Intelligence Agency has [warned](#) that China could double its deployed nuclear inventory by the end of the decade. Given the growth of China's nuclear potential and ambitions, successive US administrations have sought to engage Beijing in a strategic dialogue, including more recently in arms limitation negotiations, though so far to no avail.

Meanwhile, North Korea has continued to expand its nuclear weapons and missile capabilities. Despite years of diplomatic effort, including three unprecedented meetings between President Donald Trump and Chairman Kim Jong-un, Pyongyang has persisted in modernizing and expanding its nuclear and long-range missile forces. It is estimated to possess 50 to 70 nuclear warheads, and it has already deployed over 1,000 short- to medium-range ballistic missiles capable of striking not only all of South Korea but also Japan and US military bases in the Asia-Pacific. In the wake of the failed Hanoi summit, North Korea accelerated its missile-testing program, continued to produce nuclear materials sufficient for about seven weapons a year, and paraded an array of new capabilities, including a new type of submarine-launched ballistic missile. Having [promised](#) to unveil a "new strategic weapon," Kim paraded the world's largest intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capable of reaching the East Coast of the United States during the 75th anniversary of the Workers Party of North Korea last October.

Even as threats to regional security have grown, doubts among allies about America's continued commitment to helping address these challenges have increased over the years. Well before Trump entered the White House, key allies worried that the United States was retreating from its global responsibilities and obligations and failing to act forcefully when the circumstances seemingly demanded it—most notably when Syria used chemical weapons against civilians during its civil war. Trump's evident desire to withdraw US troops not only from what he has called the "endless wars" in the Middle East but from critical allied countries, and his insistence on viewing alliance relations in strictly transactional and financial terms, have further fueled allied concerns about America's global staying power and its seeming desire to retreat. Although President Joseph Biden has underscored his determination to rebuild America's security alliances and reaffirm US collective defense commitments, allies remain deeply concerned about the long-term staying power of America's postwar security commitments.

As worrying to allies is Washington's accelerated effort to dismantle much of the nuclear arms control edifice—starting with the ABM Treaty in 2002 and extending to the decisions to walk away from the Iran nuclear agreement, the INF Treaty, the Open Skies Treaty, and, until its recent extension, New START. All this was done with little if any input from allies whose security is directly affected by the ending of these agreements. Together, these actions have raised significant doubts in allied capitals about whether they can still count on the United States. And if they can't, how will they ensure their defense and security in the nuclear age?

America's Allies React

All security partnerships between unequal partners are characterized by a dual dynamic of deterrence and reassurance. The dominant ally needs to take actions that deter the adversary and reassure its weaker ally. Of the two, reassurance is often more difficult than deterrence, especially when the dynamic plays out in the nuclear realm. For while the adversary may be deterred by even a small chance that conflict escalates to nuclear confrontation, the ally will be reassured only if it believes there is a high likelihood that the stronger partner will come to its defense. In other words, because its security is dependent on the actions of another power, an ally will always worry about its possible abandonment in time of need.

The changing security environment characterized by Russia's return, China's rise, North Korea's advance, and America's retreat accentuates the deterrence-reassurance dilemma in a new form for America's European and Asian allies. For the first time in decades, it raises new challenges for the long-ignored nuclear dimension of their security relationships. Although renewed discussions about nuclear deterrence and reassurance have so far played out largely beyond public view in most allied countries, the issue is becoming increasingly salient as the perceived threats to security have increased. The United States and its allies cannot ignore that reality. For if we are to prevent new nuclear proliferation among these allies, it is essential to acknowledge that what has long been unthinkable is becoming thinkable once more.

Germany

The nuclear debate in Germany has been largely divided on two dimensions in recent years. One concerns a longstanding discussion about the continued viability and need to deploy US nuclear weapons on German soil and to retain the German role in NATO's nuclear missions. The recent decision to replace its dual-capable Tornado aircraft in part with US-built F18s means Germany will be in a position to continue its nuclear role for the foreseeable future, though that position does not enjoy universal

support across political parties. The second dimension of Germany's nuclear debate relates to growing concerns about the US security commitment to Germany and NATO and its implications for extended nuclear deterrence. Officially, the government has rejected any consideration of alternatives to the status quo. But outside of government, a growing number of voices have been suggesting possible alternatives to continued reliance on the US nuclear guarantee—including relying on a European nuclear umbrella composed of some combination of French, UK, and/or new capabilities. France has already [invited](#) European states interested in participating in a “strategic dialogue” on its nuclear deterrent, opening a door to such cooperation.

Poland

Faced with a growing nuclear threat on its borders from Russian missiles in Kaliningrad, Poland has pushed for greater involvement in shaping the policy of nuclear deterrence in NATO and argued for bolstering the US nuclear commitment to Europe. There also has been some interest in official circles to consider the deployment of US nuclear forces on its territory (a proposal [echoed](#) by the US ambassador to Poland last May) and participate in a possible European nuclear deterrent. In a 2017 interview, former Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski called for Europe to become a [“nuclear superpower”](#) with an arsenal to rival that of Russia. Much of Polish officialdom, however, has downplayed any interest in alternative nuclear arrangements and emphasized that the United States and NATO are the only credible guarantors of a nuclear umbrella.

Turkey

In recent years, Turkey has embarked on a more independent course in its foreign and national security policy, disagreeing with its NATO allies (including the United States) over Syria, Iraq, refugees, and relations with Russia. In many cases, Ankara has not hesitated to go its own way—including purchasing advanced missile and air defense systems from Russia over explicit US and NATO objections. At the same time, Turkey lives in a dangerous neighborhood, one where the acquisition of nuclear weapons by potential regional adversaries remains a real prospect. And this year, Ankara has found itself on the opposite side of Russia over Syria, Libya, and the Caucasus. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has made several statements suggesting Turkey might, at the very least, want to keep open the possibility of acquiring its own nuclear weapons. “Several countries have missiles with nuclear warheads,” he [said](#). “But we can't have them. This I cannot accept.” What appears to drive Erdogan in making these statements, however, is less concern about the US nuclear guarantee than the increasingly dangerous regional environment, nationalist ambitions, as well as tensions with NATO.

Japan

The nuclear debate in Japan takes place within the unique context of having been the only country to have suffered an actual nuclear attack. Opposition to nuclear weapons and support for nuclear disarmament is high across the board. At the same time, as the debate on entering the NPT in the early 1970s indicated, Tokyo regards the US security guarantee and nuclear umbrella as essential to its security. That dependence has become all the more vital as the overall security environment in northeast Asia has continued to deteriorate in light of a more assertive China and a growing North Korean nuclear and missile threat. Doubts about the credibility and sustainability of the American commitments, therefore, reverberate especially loudly in Japanese national security circles. There has been no serious discussion of revisiting the decision to forego a national nuclear option to date. But there are discussions about developing alternatives, including acquiring long-range strike capabilities. And as anxiety about the direction of US policy continues to increase, there is a growing

openness to examine alternative security arrangements, including strengthened cooperation with Australia and India.

South Korea

Successive governments in Seoul have sought to address the growing North Korean nuclear and missile threat by encouraging the implementation of the North-South denuclearization agreement of 1992, the six-party nuclear agreement of 2005, and a series of UN Security Council resolutions demanding North Korea's complete and verifiable denuclearization. Some emphasized direct engagement and negotiations, others increased foreign pressure, and all welcomed direct US involvement in the process. However, more than a quarter-century of effort (including three meetings between the US and North Korean leaders), has not succeeded in convincing Pyongyang to reverse course. Washington's most recent attempts to curtail North Korean capabilities and its quiescence in response to the North's missile testing, even as its own territory was coming within reach of North Korean missiles, have left many in Seoul worried that the United States will neglect the threat this program poses until it is too late. Some even worry that the United States will tacitly recognize North Korea as a nuclear state, akin to India and Pakistan, and opt to address the threat through an arms control framework while abandoning the insistence on complete denuclearization. This, combined with halting US-Korean military exercises and pressure from Washington on Seoul to sharply increase its payment to the United States for basing its troops in Korea, has led many to consider other options. These range from much closer nuclear planning and sharing arrangements (including the redeployment of US nonstrategic nuclear weapons to South Korea and a possible direct Korean nuclear role) to developing a national nuclear deterrent capability.

Australia

China's increasing regional assertiveness has led to the most "consequential strategic realignment" in Australian defense policy since the end of the Second World War. The [*2020 Defence Strategic Update*](#), released in July 2020, paints a dire picture of the post-COVID-19 world, in which the Indo-Pacific is at the center of global strategic competition. Australia continues to see its alliance with the United States as the central element in its defense policy. Despite suggestions by outside and former defense officials to rethink its nuclear abstinence, there is no official consideration of departing from the existing policy. At the same time, the government is advocating for the acquisition of long-range strike capabilities to enhance the credibility of its defense and deterrence posture. The same logic could—if doubts about American reliability were to become real—lead to a renewed debate about Australia's nonnuclear policy.

Strengthening Nuclear Deterrence and Reassurance

This is not the first time that the United States and its European and Asian allies have confronted a changing security environment and that questions about the credibility of the US nuclear guarantee have been raised in allied capitals. Similar concerns emerged in the 1960s (when the United States first became vulnerable to Soviet missile attack), in the 1970s and 1980s (as a result of the Soviet deployment of medium-range missiles and NATO's response), and after the Cold War (as rogue states posed new proliferating threats to allied security in Asia, Europe, and elsewhere).

Today, the security challenges confronting allies in Europe and Asia are at least as severe as during those earlier years, and they have emerged at a time when doubts about America and its security commitments are greater than ever. Although the Biden administration has pledged to reaffirm long-standing US security

commitments to its allies, a change in administration alone is unlikely to suffice in reestablishing the credibility of the US security guarantee, including the nuclear umbrella, in the eyes of most allies. Trust has been broken, and it will take more than a simple return to business as usual to reassure allies of America's commitments. If Washington is to reestablish its credibility, it will take time and great effort on the part of the United States and its allies to rebuild confidence in their joint framework for collective defense. That said, the relationships are not beyond repair—the current crisis is less a problem of allied demand for American engagement than the lack of supply on the part of the United States.

The United States will have to take the lead in rebuilding trust and confidence in its security commitments—including the nuclear guarantee. It will have to demonstrate that commitment in new and evident ways and work closely and collaboratively with its allies in Europe and Asia to renew their collective defense framework, including especially its long-neglected but increasingly important nuclear dimension. At the same time, allies will need to do their part to help rebuild the relationship with Washington and among themselves to strengthen overall deterrence and make US reassurance more credible and convincing. And all of the allies will need to commit to rethinking the arms control framework, nuclear and conventional, that should guide relations between the United States, Russia, China, and key Asian and European powers.

Rebuilding US Leadership

The United States can take three major steps to rebuild confidence in the US security commitments to its allies, including recommitting to extended nuclear deterrence.

First, it is crucial that the president of the United States, at the earliest possible opportunity, reaffirms the foundational cornerstones of America's security commitments, including:

- Recommit unequivocally to upholding the collective defense commitments enshrined in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty and bilateral security treaties with Australia and Japan, and Article 3 of the mutual defense agreement with South Korea.
- Reverse decisions to remove US troops from Germany and commit to retain existing US troop levels in Europe and Asia for the foreseeable future.
- Negotiate long-term, balanced cost-sharing agreements for maintaining US forces in Europe and Asia that represent fairness in burden sharing rather than the cost-plus-50 percent demand of the Trump administration.

Second, the United States needs to proactively raise the salience of nuclear weapons issues in its alliance relations, including by bringing allies more into its own nuclear deliberations. Existing mechanisms, even those long practiced within NATO, are no longer sufficient to reassure allies of the US nuclear commitment. Accordingly, we recommend the United States:

- Include European and Asian allies in the nuclear planning process from the outset. Not only will allies benefit from understanding how the process works and how their security interests are incorporated in the planning process, but US planners would benefit from incorporating diverse experiences and perspectives into that process.

- Increase the centrality of alliance crisis-management exercises, including exercises that involve a nuclear dimension. Reassurance is built through familiarity and inclusion, which is what regular exercising helps accomplish. War-gaming different scenarios will also help enhance the credibility of the US security commitment by demonstrating how the United States plans to respond in a crisis.
- Involve political leaders at the highest levels in alliance war games and exercises. It has been decades since cabinet-level officials from alliance countries have actively participated in crisis exercises and war games involving nuclear weapons simulations. Yet such exercises not only enhance preparedness but help to reassure leaders that their security is intertwined and best advanced by working together.

Third, the United States needs to take steps to bolster the deterrence and defense capabilities of the European and Asian alliances, including:

- Increase conventional defense capabilities in Europe and Asia by enhancing the readiness of land, air, and naval forces to counter the growing capabilities of regional adversaries. This is not the time to reduce US forces or investments in defense capabilities, given the rapid modernization and improvement of Russian and Chinese militaries and the growing nuclear and missile threat from North Korea. A strong, continuing US military presence will not only boost deterrence and defense of allies in both regions but also provide a stabilizing presence that will help reassure other countries that confront growing military dangers, including Taiwan, Indonesia, and India.
- Deploy additional missile defense capabilities in Europe and Asia by completing and, if necessary, expanding the NATO anti-ballistic missile system to defend against threats in the Middle East and deploying additional missile defense assets to Asia, including advanced Patriot, THAAD, Aegis, and Aegis Ashore systems. By providing the core missile defense elements, the United States can continue to enable allies to make their own contributions to collective missile defense systems.
- If needed, review the nonstrategic nuclear weapons posture. If we do not see important steps to limit nuclear capabilities by China and Russia, and to denuclearize by North Korea, then pressure will likely build for upgrading and, if necessary, enhanced forward deployment of nuclear-capable systems. The forward deployment of US nonstrategic nuclear weapons and dual-capable systems has long been viewed by some allies as an essential form of reassurance, as has the direct participation of allies in some nuclear missions. Any consideration of these options should be done sensitively and must involve careful, yet serious, deliberation with all relevant regional allies.

Rebuilding US leadership by way of these measures would, however, only be a first step to strengthening reassurance and deterrence within the alliance systems. Washington can work with its allies to undertake three additional sets of actions not only to bolster collective defense and security but also to help rebuild US overall leadership of its security alliances. One is to encourage its European allies to build up their own defense capabilities, which will not only enhance deterrence but also help sustain the US commitment to their security. The second is for the United States to work with its three Asian allies to embrace multilateral nuclear planning and deterrence, much as it has in the NATO context. Finally, the United States should lead an effort to modernize and extend arms control efforts to help

stabilize the overall security situation confronting the transatlantic and transpacific partners. In recommitting to arms control, the United States would signal its return as one of the primary guarantors of the nonproliferation regime, reassure its allies, and, more broadly, reassure the nonnuclear weapons states within the NPT who are growing increasingly concerned about the lack of progress by nuclear weapons states toward fulfilling their Article VI commitments.

Strengthening European Defense Capabilities

There is a pressing need to rebalance the transatlantic partnership. Europe needs to take more responsibility for its own defense and security, and the United States needs to actively encourage Europe to do so. Far from risking decoupling, a stronger, more capable, and independent Europe will bolster deterrence and enhance the security connection with the United States. Such rebalancing entails three major steps.

The first step is to build up European defense and security cooperation within the transatlantic partnership.

- Washington should encourage and promote European defense and security cooperation and autonomy. A stronger, more independent Europe within the transatlantic partnership will necessarily mean a Europe that takes on greater responsibilities and that can increasingly act on its own. Far from fearing European autonomy, the United States should embrace it. It is critical to rebalance responsibilities and capabilities between Europe and the United States within the Alliance rather than as an alternative to the Alliance.
- European cooperation needs to focus on real military capabilities, not just more processes. The ultimate measure of European defense cooperation (whether within a European Union, NATO, or other format) lies in the additional military capabilities it helps bring to the fore. The rebalancing of the transatlantic relationship ultimately rests on Europeans not only demonstrating a willingness to take on more of the burdens and responsibility but the capability of doing so. That requires more investment, deeper cooperation, and greater unity of effort than has long been apparent.

Second, whether as part of building up European cooperation or not, it is vital that Europe makes the necessary defense investments it has committed to making.

- European allies should improve war-fighting capabilities. In 2014, NATO allies committed to spending 2 percent of their gross domestic product on defense within a decade, of which at least 20 percent is to be spent on major equipment as well as research and development. About one-third of allies have achieved the 2 percent target and more than half the 20 percent target. Yet even as overall European defense spending has increased since 2014, not all countries are on course to meet the 2 percent target by 2024. They need to do so. That said, while the 2 percent target remains important, the real measure of success will be the tangible commitment by all allies to improve their overall war-fighting capabilities.
- Europe should improve overall readiness and the rapid deployability of its forces. In 2018, NATO agreed to be able to deploy 30 medium-heavy battalions, 30 fighter squadrons, and 30 combat ships from across the

Alliance to meet any threat to NATO territory within 30 days. It is vital that the European allies meet this commitment, preferably without having to rely on any US capabilities, within the next year.

Third, as part of the European pillar and improved capabilities, Europe needs to build up the nuclear dimension of its defense efforts.

- NATO countries that perform nuclear tasks should retain them and modernize their capabilities. Presently, four European countries maintain dual-capable aircraft able to deliver US nuclear weapons as part of NATO's sharing arrangements. All four are committed to modernizing their delivery systems and retaining their nuclear delivery capability. These arrangements constitute a vital element in NATO's overall deterrence strategy, including by strengthening the US nuclear guarantee to Europe.
- France and Britain should enhance their nuclear collaboration and maintain strong and modern nuclear deterrence forces. Since 1995, France and Britain have closely collaborated on nuclear matters—especially given their more recent joint efforts at maintaining their arsenals under the Lancaster Agreement—recognizing that their security and vital interests were inextricably linked. London and Paris should build on the success of this collaboration to strengthen the ability of both nations' nuclear forces to deter a wider range of contingencies.
- France and Britain should extend their nuclear deterrent to their European allies. Britain has long committed its independent deterrent to NATO and is an active member of the Nuclear Planning Group. France has offered to open a "strategic dialogue" with its European partners "on the role played by France's nuclear deterrence in our collective security," including participating in exercises of the deterrent forces. This dialogue should be extended to include the United Kingdom and be closely coordinated with NATO nuclear deliberations. Ultimately, European defense cooperation would benefit from a strong, European-oriented nuclear deterrent capability separate from the US nuclear umbrella.

Multilateral Deterrence in Asia

In Asia, a more assertive China is widely seen as constituting a growing and significant security threat to Australia, Japan, and—increasingly—South Korea. Japan and South Korea view the North Korean threat, especially its growing nuclear and missile capabilities, in almost existential terms. As a result, all three allies have continued to invest in and expand their defense capabilities, including by deploying significant missile defenses and exploring the possibility of acquiring theater-wide or intermediate-range strike forces able to hold China and/or North Korea at risk.

For these principal US allies in Asia, the overriding security question is less a lack of capabilities than the absence of a regional or multilateral security framework that ties America more closely to their security. That is particularly true for nuclear weapons issues, which have traditionally been viewed by Washington through a global or transatlantic lens, rather than from an Asian perspective. Thus, the United States has a tradition of negotiating arms control agreements with its security commitments to Europe uppermost in mind but often without much consideration of its commitments to Asian allies. And whereas NATO has been the cornerstone of European security for the United States, Asia lacks a collective defense framework, and US allies have had to rely on bilateral (and weaker) treaty arrangements.

With Asia increasingly seen in Washington as the primary strategic and geopolitical theater of its global engagements, it is increasingly critical for the United States and its principal allies to coordinate strategy and combine efforts.

- The United States should prioritize reestablishing strong trilateral security cooperation with Japan and South Korea. The reemerging differences between Seoul and Tokyo have weakened joint efforts to address the growing threat from North Korea. Washington's support is critical to help both countries overcome historical differences, strengthen trilateral security cooperation, and enhance the overall coordination of US, Korean, and Japanese forces and capabilities. Trilateral security cooperation is a prerequisite to address the North Korean threat and to build a multilateral security framework within Asia as a whole.
- The United States should create an Asian Nuclear Planning Group. Since 1967, the NATO Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) has proved a critical factor in reassuring European allies of the US nuclear guarantee and the main body for conducting nuclear exercises and planning. To reassure its key Asian allies, Washington should establish a similar body that would include Australia, Japan, and South Korea. This Asian NPG would bring the three countries into US nuclear planning processes and provide a platform for these allies to discuss specific policies associated with US nuclear forces and conduct war games and exercises, including those involving the highest political-level participation. Such an arrangement would not replace existing bilateral mutual defense pacts, but it would strengthen them.
- The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue partners will need to consider how they would respond to a future request from South Korea to join in their dialogue. If the North Korean nuclear threat continues, and especially if the situation deteriorates further, South Korea may well seek a more formal alignment with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad). The renewed embrace of the Quad by the United States, India, Japan, and Australia is a direct response to China's military power and changes in Chinese military behavior and designed to strengthen multilateral security cooperation. Following Chinese military activities on its borders, India's commitment to the Quad has increased, leading to a second ministerial meeting in October 2020 and expanded naval exercises with other Quad members.

Multilateral Arms Control

The biggest nuclear unknown is the scope and eventual scale of the Chinese nuclear deterrent forces. Over the past decade, Beijing has embarked on an extensive nuclear modernization program, including the deployment of mobile medium- and intermediate-range missiles and a new mobile launcher for long-range missiles. It has continued developing a new mobile, multiwarhead ICBM and a dual-capable air-launched ballistic missile—both primarily designed to penetrate US and regional missile defenses. All of these advancements point to an ambitious nuclear weapons program, though its exact scope and scale remain shrouded in secrecy.

Beijing has long adhered to a strategy of minimum nuclear deterrence and a strict no-first-use policy. Both policies comported with a country that for decades stood in the shadow of US global military power and even that of the Soviet Union and Russia. Today, however, China's economic, political, and military power vastly outpace those

of Russia and are approaching those of the United States. To retain a minimal nuclear-deterrent posture under these circumstances, though not impossible, would certainly represent an exception to its expansion of overall power.

The United States and its allies, therefore, have a powerful incentive to penetrate China's nuclear opacity and get a greater insight into its capabilities. No doubt, significant intelligence resources are directed at finding out the true nature of Chinese nuclear capabilities. But arms control can also play a role in this effort, providing greater transparency about capabilities, an exchange of views on intentions, and enhanced stability in the overall nuclear relationship. Therefore, it makes sense to complement long-standing US-Russian arms control negotiations with talks involving the other recognized nuclear weapons states—China as well as France and the United Kingdom, which deploy forces of comparable size. This expanded arms control framework should include a multipronged effort:

- Following the welcome extension of New START, the United States and Russia should negotiate a new bilateral arms control agreement. Given the size of US and Russian nuclear arsenals relative to the other nuclear weapons states, a new agreement that would include further reductions and new systems is a crucial confidence-building measure as the United States begins discussions on pursuing a multilateral nuclear arms control agreement. Such a new agreement—which could cover all nuclear warheads, including those in storage, as well as novel nuclear delivery systems—would provide crucial reassurance to America's allies.
- The five permanent members of the UN Security Council (P5) should engage in a strategic dialogue on nuclear weapons issues. The P5 bear a unique responsibility for international peace and security, not only as permanent members of the Security Council but as nuclear weapons states that under the NPT are committed to reducing their nuclear arsenals. They should meet at the earliest opportunity and agree to engage in a dialogue on strategic stability, the role of nuclear weapons, the relationship between offense and defense, the impact of new technologies, and other critical strategic issues.
- The P5 should negotiate nuclear confidence-building and transparency measures. The strategic dialogue should aim to facilitate the opening of talks on nuclear confidence-building measures, including data exchanges on weapons and weapons systems, notification of missile testing and nuclear exercises, and visits to nuclear facilities. As a first step, the United States and Russia could invite representatives of the other nuclear powers to observe inspections that both countries conduct as part of existing arms control obligations.
- Efforts to multilateralize nuclear arms control should place particular emphasis on engaging China. China has long maintained that it will not participate in arms control agreements until Russia and the United States have reduced their nuclear arsenals to levels comparable to that of its arsenal. However, China's potential for vertical proliferation cannot be ignored. The United States must engage China in dialogue akin to the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks and consider allowing China to participate in New START monitoring as first steps. The ultimate goal would be to agree on force limitations at the lowest possible level for each country.

A multilateral arms control framework could significantly enhance strategic stability and contribute to reassuring America's European and Asian allies about the

commitment of the nuclear powers to maintain global nuclear stability. It would also help reassure non-nuclear weapons states party to the NPT that the nuclear states are committed to taking concrete steps toward fulfilling their Article 6 agreements under the NPT.

Conclusion

For more than 50 years, America's security alliances have been critical to ensuring the nonproliferation of nuclear weapons. By extending the nuclear umbrella to defend its allies in Europe and Asia, the United States ensured their security against nuclear attack and intimidation and removed any perceived need on their part to acquire a nuclear capability. However, the security climate confronting allies is changing rapidly, as Russia moves aggressively to exert its influence, China grows ever bolder and more ambitious in its global reach, North Korea expands its growing nuclear and missile capability, and a politically divided America raises questions about the future of its global engagement. Faced with these changing circumstances, US allies face growing uncertainty about the long-term viability of their alliances with the United States and are beginning to assess the possibility of alternative security arrangements, including regarding the nuclear dimension.

The Biden administration has made rebuilding America's alliances a fundamental priority from the moment it takes office. Reaffirming collective defense commitments in Europe and Asia is a necessary and welcome step. But it will take more than presidential words to rebuild alliances. It will require transforming relationships in more fundamental ways—including bolstering deterrence and defense capabilities all around, bringing European and Asian allies into US nuclear planning processes, and expanding arms control efforts that involve not just Russia but also, and especially, China. This is hardly an impossible agenda; but its urgency is underscored by the reality that without rebuilding the alliance structures that have provided the foundation of security in Europe and Asia, the question of nuclear proliferation among allies could once again emerge on the agenda.

Task Force on US Allies and Nuclear Weapons Proliferation

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