Maintaining America's Superpower Status:

A Series on Restoring America's Credible Deterrence After Putin's Invasion of Ukraine

INTRODUCTION TO SERIES

Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine represents the latest in a long line of Russian military interventions aimed at reestablishing its former sphere of influence, underpinned by dissatisfaction with the conclusion of the Cold War. Whether or not Putin is successful, the fact that he felt confident to act in this way is an indictment of how the Biden Administration let this happen and the effectiveness of current alliance structures.

Stepping back from the events of the day, two observations stand out and serve as an invitation for this primer. First, Putin did not attempt this action during the Trump Administration, even though he appears to have had the same views then and earlier about Russia's claim to Ukraine. Second, over the last year, other adversaries also stepped up their aggressive actions, from Communist China flying hundreds of sorties in Taiwan's air defense identification zone to Iran mobilizing its proxies to attack America's neighbors and even threaten Americans directly. Put differently, America's adversaries today demonstrate a newfound boldness in pursuing their objectives.

What, then, does it mean for America to be a global superpower, and what will this look like in the aftermath of current events? However current circumstances resolve, what should Americans expect of their leadership to advance their priorities and interests overseas? How does America effectively deter adversaries from causing harm to American interests, and how does America ensure that its engagements with other nations result in outcomes that physically and materially benefit Americans? Indeed, on the last point, little is known about what President Biden says to adversaries during his virtual summits, and his remarks to the press have been minimal.

This series starts with the premise that America was overall safer and more prosperous under the Trump Administration and that, from the period January 2017 until January 2021, America's adversaries did not succeed in undermining America's leadership position in the world. They were effectively deterred, and the world was safer and more stable. The series draws lessons from the events of those years to distill the core principles of the America First foreign policy that made the world safer and preserved America's global leadership. The four focus areas are America's engagement with allies; America's interaction with adversaries; the role, culture, and institution of the American military; and the related topics of America's economic and energy security. Without success in these four areas, America cannot protect Americans or their interests around the world

I. AMERICA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH ALLIES

CORE TENETS

- Only Americans—not even our best allies—will consistently place America's interests first.
- Working with allies depends on a unity of purpose and action to confront adversaries.
- America engages directly in different regions only when there is buy-in from regional partners who are committed to doing so as well.
- America's work within multilateral settings does not prevent it from acting unilaterally or bilaterally, nor does it restrict its ability to act in the manner of its choosing.
- Adversaries must be confronted globally, not regionally.
- Expansion without justification leads to irrelevance. To endure, alliances must evolve and ensure all members carry their share of the burden.

OVERVIEW

America First does not mean America alone. It means, as President Donald J. Trump described in his first address to the United Nations General Assembly in 2017, that America's engagement with other nations should clearly define and put the interests and security of the American people first—the people to whom all American elected representatives are directly accountable. There are several implications that follow from this principle; foremost among them is that goodwill alone is not enough to justify commitments by America to other nations. Rather, an America First approach is distinguished by a shared and clear understanding that in working together, America and other nations recognize the stakes and benefits for their people. By contrast, the consensus Washington approach to alliances can be described as "nostalgia-driven," as they remain focused on America's experiences during the Cold War and an assumption that only countries with the same composition and structure—for example, only functioning democracies working in tandem with one another—can work together irrespective of their priorities, views of threats, or ability/commitment to working together. A significant factor driving Putin's invasion of Ukraine was the fact that Germany, one of the most prominent democracies in Europe, is dependent on unreliable Russian energy for much of its energy needs and so is unreliable, if not insincere, in deterring Russia. Indeed, the Biden Administration's *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* states that "[w]e will work alongside fellow democracies across the globe to deter and defend against aggression from hostile adversaries." (White House, Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, 19). Of course, many of America's closest allies share America's democratic values, but the world is a very different place from what it was during the Cold War. We face a different adversary in Communist China. Our threats are more complex—emanating from an array of sources with different motives—and geographically dispersed, and a significantly higher number of nations have many more resources at their disposal to do more and to fight for themselves. Our shared view of threats and the need to address them, rather than only historical ties or common political values, dictates the success of America's efforts with allies.

A clear and objectives-based America First approach to working with allies has other virtues—namely, adaptability and transparency that conveys to non-allied nations that America is not limited only to the existing allies it has and that there is a clear opportunity and constructive way to work with America even if not part of America's formal alliance structures. Namely, other nations can choose to share our view of who our adversaries are, share our commitment to stopping them, and embrace our method for doing so. This simple formula ensures everyone is working in lockstep and that allied nations are aligned in their worldview and in their commitments to contribute to meeting shared objectives.

The following six principles describe the America First approach for how America should engage with allies.

1. **Only Americans—not even our best allies—will consistently place America's interests first.**
   Americans cannot depend on any other nation to represent and advance American interests. The interests of nations that have shared history, values, and stated goals will sometimes diverge from our own. America can and does do much for other nations, but this must be done when the objectives of doing so clearly advance the well-being of the American people. Moreover, in cases where America happens to share the worldview and values of another nation, it is important to recognize that that is often the result of shared experiences—in the case of America and its European allies, having fought wars alongside one another against common adversaries, for example—and not because of America's direct efforts to shape the identity and government structure of other nations. Indeed, even the famed Marshall Plan to revitalize Europe's economy was justified on the grounds that Europe's economic revival directly impacted Americans' safety and world peace. Similarly, America's efforts to unilaterally transform other nations into replicas of America have near- universally failed, for the very reason that no matter the actions pushed by external actors, any meaningful change within those nations depends on the decisions those other nations make—their culture, history, and a people-driven commitment to change.

   It is not in the interest of the American people for America to impose its own image, values, or institutional structures on other nations absent a clear justification that ties doing so to immediate and existential justifications. Indeed, the United States did so to Germany and Japan during World War II, though this was in the context of total war when that was the only remaining option to bring peace. As a general principle in other circumstances, the goal should be to identify common priorities and to build a path to work together to achieve strategic objectives in the interests of both the American people and those of other nations where possible. The alignment of values can result from a shared history of working together to meet shared objectives, particularly to deter adversaries. This is exemplified most clearly by the Abraham Accords, where Israel and its neighbors came together not because of having the same government structure or values but rather because of a shared perspective of opportunities and of threats.

2. **Working with allies depends on a unity of purpose and action to confront adversaries.** America should prioritize engagement with allies who share common objectives and the willingness to act—particularly as it pertains to confronting adversaries—instead of those content to free-ride off America's investments and sacrifices. A cornerstone of working with allies—both current and future—should be

to agree regarding identifying and willingness to confront a shared adversary and have clearly scoped objectives.

3. **America engages directly in different regions only when there is buy-in from regional partners who are committed to doing so as well.** Although America has interests across regions, achieving its objectives in a region should not always mean America commits troops or resources directly to address that objective. Rather, America sets the regional conditions for allies to work together towards clearly defined shared objectives in alignment with America's determination of objectives. Indeed, there is a range of actions America can take—from instituting sanctions to trade policies—that do not require an outsized commitment of American taxpayer dollars or military engagement and which, depending on the nature of the conflict, can achieve objectives without risking strategic overreach.

4. **America's work within multilateral settings does not prevent it from acting unilaterally or bilaterally, nor does it restrict its ability to act in the manner of its choosing.** The fact that America belongs to a particular regional or functional alliance, such as North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), does not mean that America cannot directly interface with other nations, whether allies or adversaries. By the same token, there may be local or regional issues between NATO members with little American interest—for example, managing refugee inflows from conflict areas in the Middle East and Eastern Europe—that could be resolved bilaterally and not require the entire alliance to become engaged. Although prior consultation is generally encouraged, America can make the determination about how much and with whom such prior consultation should take place, particularly with reference to the outcome of a particular course of action and expectations for any follow-on actions.

5. **Adversaries must be confronted globally, not regionally.** Regional crises that involve America are rarely limited to a single region and so necessarily require a global response. As such, America will seek partnerships around the world wherever opportunities may exist for advancing policy objectives, particularly when it comes to deterring adversaries in a region where those partners may have interests. As mentioned earlier, the world is a different place from the immediate aftermath of World War II, during which many of today's alliance structures were formed. Although these structures, particularly NATO, grew stronger as a result of shared training and integration, their missions and overall purpose also expanded to include missions like scientific collaborations and democracy promotion. Moreover, individual nations within the alliance had very different experiences during the post-Cold War setting and today have different, even conflicting, priorities when it comes to addressing America's adversaries, much as they did during the Cold War. At the same time, the threat landscape became far more complex and geographically distributed, with the emergence of Communist China as the top nation-state adversary, the Iranian government's nuclear ambitions and expansive proxy terrorist network, and the persistent threat of Islamist terrorists, to name a few.

   These circumstances require a worldwide perspective to confront adversaries—acknowledging their reach in other parts of the world and allowing for more opportunities to apply pressure alongside allies in other regions. For example, disentangling European nations from dependence on Russian energy may mean building alternative energy sources with Middle East partners. Similarly, reducing

dependence on Communist China for critical needs like pharmaceuticals requires nearshoring to allied nations, whether in East Asia or in other theaters.

6. **Expansion without justification leads to irrelevance. To endure, alliances must evolve and ensure all members carry their share of the burden.** The NATO experience demonstrates that the first priority should be to examine thoroughly what the purpose of the alliance is given the long-term strategic threats and how the alliance currently functions, particularly if there is an uneven distribution of responsibilities. Indeed, expansion may, after all, make sense, but it may be to include more allies from other regions alongside an overhaul and modernization of the tools and processes of how NATO operates, rather than solely expanding across Europe.

II. AMERICA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH ADVERSARIES

CORE TENETS

— An American president cannot keep the American people safe or resolve global crises without directly engaging with both adversaries and allies.

— Engagement with an adversary includes conditions but not preemptive concessions.

— Today's adversary might be tomorrow's ally.

— Change in an adversary's behavior must match a change in intentions.

OVERVIEW

A Commander-in-Chief and his team must be able to demonstrate an ability to engage effectively with adversaries. Direct engagement by the president of the United States with counterparts, whether of allied or adversarial nations, is a core part of the office and can be the difference between escalating or diffusing geopolitical crises. It is also the most expeditious way to advance American interests with other nations and clarify consequences for adversaries. Successful examples in America's history include President Richard Nixon's visit to China to meet with Chairman Mao Zedong, but also includes President Ronald Reagan's meeting with Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev in Reykjavik, which established a rapport between the heads of two adversarial nations; President John F. Kennedy's engagement with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev amid the Cuban Missile Crisis that averted a nuclear showdown. President Donald J. Trump's engagement with North Korea led to a cessation of missile launches for a year and the return of American servicemembers killed in action decades prior. President Trump's engagement with the Taliban paved the way for a conditions-based withdrawal from Afghanistan (one that the Biden Administration subsequently abandoned) and that with Russia ensured at the time that Vladimir Putin did not threaten neighboring nations' sovereignty. An American president cannot keep the American people safe or resolve global crises without directly engaging with adversaries. In her eulogy for President Reagan, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher said of him that he "won the Cold War—not only without firing a shot, but also by inviting enemies out of their fortress and turning them into friends."

Indeed, it can be argued that an important means of achieving our objectives abroad depends on bringing more nations to our side. By the same token, there are situations in which strategic disengagement from or non-engagement with adversaries is warranted. For example, President Trump removed Turkey, a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member and a complicated partner, from the F-35 program because it agreed to purchase the Russian S-400 air defense system. Non-engagement or disengagement with adversaries sends a message just as clearly as engagement. By canceling this specific engagement, President Trump sent a direct and clear message to Turkey's President Tayyip Erdogan that he cannot use American technology while relying on that of an adversary.

The question of engagement with adversaries is particularly complicated since a nation could cease being an adversary from one administration to the next, especially if the statements and actions of its leadership demonstrate a willingness to cooperate with the United States (for example, Muammar Qaddafi's announced a halt to his pursuit of nuclear weapons). The same can be said of allies who, under different leadership, pose new challenges to the United States (for example, Turkey under the leadership of Erdogan). Here it is important to note as well that the formula is not the same when it comes to our top nation-state adversary, Communist

China. Unlike nations whose objectives are generally local and animosity toward the United States is not core to their government's identity, Communist China is a nation that marshals all aspects of its society and military directly toward the single aim of threatening the United States militarily and economically. It will take significantly more for our top strategic adversary to demonstrate a change in behavior and intent beyond just abandoning specific policies or limited ideological tenets to signal its interest in improving relations with the United States.

Here it needs to be emphasized that the only thing meant by engagement is some form of communication. It is distinct from unenforced agreements with or concessions to adversaries, as exhibited by both the Obama and Biden Administration's efforts to bring Iran into a nuclear deal by offering sanctions relief. Another example is the "peace process" engagement by Israel and the Palestinian Authority, characterized by Israeli concessions of land in exchange for illusory promises of peace. The Trump Administration's engagement with the Taliban, by contrast, was heavily conditioned on the Taliban not deviating from U.S.-led negotiations and the commitment that any deviation would be met with a swift response from the United States.

The following four principles describe the America First approach to how America should engage with adversaries:

1. **An American president cannot keep the American people safe or resolve global crises without directly engaging with both adversaries and allies.** Protecting the American people and advancing their needs overseas depends not only on sharing values with other nations but also on sharing their interests. The introduction to this series clarifies that an America First approach "conveys to non-allied nations that America is not limited only to the existing allies it has and that there is a clear opportunity and constructive way to work with America even if not part of America's formal alliance structures." In other words, as important as the status of "ally" is, more fundamental to success and America's work overseas is that our work with other nations is effective and that it leads to the advancement of our interests and needs. Certainly, we stand by our allies and look first to work with them, but America must continuously strive to build opportunities to reach out to non-allied nations as well. This means also engaging with non-allied nations, including adversaries if addressing the needs of the American people depends on that engagement.

2. **Engagement with an adversary includes conditions but not preemptive concessions.** Engagement can take many forms and should not include unilateral concessions by the United States absent any clear leverage by the United States or clear incentive for the adversary to change. An example of the latter is the Biden Administration's lifting of Iranian sanctions and terrorist designations with the aim of bringing them into a new nuclear deal when in fact, their behavior and intentions had not changed. Indeed, if any concessions potentially jeopardize Americans' security, these should be presented in the form of treaties ratified by the Senate. By being presented before the Senate within the context of a treaty, the American people—through their representatives in Congress—have a voice in adjudicating their merits. The very act of engaging reflects an actor's interest in listening but makes no promises or offers. By the same token, engagement is the channel to state conditions and threats. President Trump's engagement with Taliban leader Mullah Baradar was far from cordial and indeed included an unambiguous understanding of the consequences of the Taliban's deviation from the peace negotiations, but it was necessary. Similarly, with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, President Trump made it clear that a commitment to peace on the Korean peninsula, including ceasing all development of nuclear weapons, could result in a better future for the North Korean people. Whether or not

the well-being of his people mattered to Kim, this rhetoric and tone suggested the United States was open to amicable relations with North Korea. But that that future was conditioned on steps from Kim and required seriousness from the North Korean leader.

3. **Today's adversary might be tomorrow's ally.** Despite fluctuating strength of the U.S. economy, even during a global pandemic and the economic devastation that followed, America remains unrivaled in terms of investment and free market enterprise. By extension, associating with America brings with it benefits, including elevated standing in the world. This also means that, from America's standpoint, any engagement that hints at this should be approached judiciously and strategically, with a clear connection to advancing America's interests overseas. Certainly, America's adversaries are unambiguous in their rhetoric and actions to harm Americans and America. But—especially with geographically and geopolitically isolated nations like North Korea—there can be an opportunity to de-escalate tensions by showing a pathway toward amicable relations and wins on both sides of the relationship. Indeed, in the early 2000s, Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi gave up his nuclear ambitions and paid the families of the victims of the Lockerbie bombings. A wise foreign policy, moreover, would recognize the leverage gained by winning over an isolated adversary like a Venezuela or North Korea vis-à-vis a strategic adversary like Communist China. Although making promises should be avoided in engagement with adversaries, clarifying the potential of better relations if specific steps are taken can be a useful approach in resolving diplomatic crises.

4. **Change in an adversary's behavior must a match change in intentions.** An adversary's change in rhetoric must be matched by demonstrable changes in action before there can be any improvement in relations with the United States. Demonstrated changes of action are vital, and any change in behavior must be part of a clear path to responsible behavior that no longer threatens the United States and its allies. Most often, this can be measured vis-à-vis how an adversary's change in behavior departs from its ideological tenets or founding doctrines. The Trump Administration's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran was conditioned on Iran meeting 12 demands—ranging from Iran's halt to sponsorship of terrorism to stopping threats to America's regional allies. Meeting these 12 demands would effectively mean Iran changing its ambitions and much of its founding ideological tenets. But, if Iran meets those 12 demands, the United States will then remove sanctions and be open to a new nuclear deal. The United States, in other words, is bound by meeting its commitments if Iran demonstrates that it has made all the changes the United States demanded of it. Offering a path out of adversarial relations—even if that path is unrealistic or very long-term—provides the opening for diplomacy to take its course.

III. The Role, Culture, and Institution of the U.S. Military

Core Tenets

— The military's first and most important priority is its support towards its service members.

— The mission of the military is to deter America's adversaries and, if deterrence fails, fight and win the Nation's wars.

— The military's success is determined by four areas: policies, personnel, budget, and training.

— Any personnel policy, training, budgetary priority, or procurement that does not directly support this mission is a distraction from it and therefore imperils Americans' security.

— A responsible defense budget must focus on how money is spent rather than how much money is spent.

Overview

A nation's strongest and most cherished assets are its sons and daughters serving in uniform. These young men and women sacrifice their lives daily to preserve America's freedom and protect the American people. They deserve to know the institution of the military stands behind them and will provide them with the support and resources they need to succeed in their mission.

The support the Nation's service members receive from the institution of the military is an integral part of a military succeeding in its mission of deterring the nation's adversaries and, if deterrence fails, fighting and winning its nation's wars. This is a particularly urgent priority amidst policies imposed by the Biden Administration's Department of Defense (DoD), which downplays its central mission and systematically rejects religious exemptions for vaccination requirements and requires divisive "woke" training for service members. How well a military focuses on this mission depends on four factors: its budget, procurement, training, and policies. All four must be aligned with advancing the military's mission. By extension, any allocation of resources—training, policies, budgetary, procurement—outside of this mission are distractions. For the strongest military in the world to remain strong, it must focus—and continually improve on—its ability to meet its core mission objectives, especially when America's adversaries are continually seeking ways to challenge America's position in the world.

Questions about the training, policies, and budgetary priorities of the U.S. military have reemerged in recent years. America's two costly decades in Afghanistan prompted a serious national conversation surrounding the mission America's service members are sent overseas to accomplish and how American tax dollars are spent. More recently, "woke" curricula and policies in the military under the Biden Administration—policies that range from vaccine mandates to errant training programs to efforts to root out extremism within the military through politically-charged approaches—invite scrutiny over not only the merits of these efforts and their likely corrosive consequences on recruitment (particularly at a time when different service branches report challenges in recruitment) but also about accountability among the senior ranks of the military's leadership.

The following five principles describe the America First approach to understanding the role, culture, and institution of the U.S. military:

1. **The military's first and most important priority is its support towards its service members.** "A true soldier fights not because he hates what is in front of him, but because he loves what is behind him." This quote by G.K. Chesterton speaks to the important role of America's government, and in particular its military, in supporting American service members. United in a common cause to defend the United States (and many making the ultimate sacrifice to do so), America's service members share a distinct bond. Yet, this unity has been challenged by forced training in Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion to appease a "woke" culture. This training has directly taken away the military's purpose from being the world's best fighting force, emphasizing cultural trends rather than combat readiness. As one example, a report commissioned by the offices of Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR) and Representative Mike Gallagher (WI-08) published in 2021 found that the Navy's leadership is "excessively reactive to an unyielding U.S. news cycle…and make punitive decisions based on negative news reports rather than the service's own standards of discipline." Furthermore, the lowering of recruitment standards in order to meet diversity quotas has weakened America's defense readiness. The U.S. should continue to hold an equal opportunity for all recruits but maintain a consistent standard of excellence. Additionally, all military academies should foster a curriculum driven by the necessity to develop warriors that can adapt to the evolving threat landscape and nature of warfare. By focusing not only on unrelated subjects but on ones that are divisive and punitive toward service members, the service branches and military academies risk eroding morale and depriving service members of the support and knowledge they need to meet the needs of being effective on the battlefield.

2. **The mission of the military is to deter America's adversaries and, if deterrence fails, fight and win the Nation's wars.** This point has been lost amid national debates on America's presence in Afghanistan and the broader war on terror. On one level, America's fight against terrorists is a tactical question of targeting and eliminating terrorist operatives and leadership. On a strategic level, fighting terrorism, or "counter-terrorism," centered on what on-the-ground conditions were necessary to prevent a particular area from becoming a terrorist haven and what role the U.S. military should play in defining these conditions. Counter-terrorism soon became a justification for a broad range of civil society programs and stabilization efforts ranging from fighting corruption to constructing courthouses and police buildings in Afghanistan, as one report to Congress documented. All these projects, as important as they might have been, required accountability and oversight to make sure they directly addressed the terrorist threat. One byproduct of the absence of oversight over military spending for these projects fed a mushrooming and unaccountable contracting ecosystem rife with fraud and large sums of waste of taxpayer dollars. These projects meant that the DoD's training and budget, alongside those of other U.S. government agencies, was being spent on building and sustaining other nations' infrastructure irrespective of the success of those projects—as the previous examples demonstrate and as documented in numerous reports produced by the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. Service members involved in this work were spending less time than they could otherwise invest in training for warfighting. And fewer resources were available for investments to meet and deter future threats.

3. **The military's success is determined by four areas: policies, personnel, budget, and training.** How does one evaluate whether the military is focused on its success? While many factors are key to a military's success on the battlefield—particularly the

effectiveness of a strategy—several basic concrete issues are necessary (albeit insufficient) for the military to be successful. In other words, at issue is whether the military is setting correct priorities and evaluating this can be done in the following areas: how it trains service members, the institution's approach to personnel, and ensuring that its budget and procurement of weapons systems all align with the core missions of deterrence and warfighting and the threats from our adversaries. Specifically, on personnel policy, the institution must consistently evaluate and refine its approach to both recruitment and promotions. Regarding recruitment, the military must not compromise fitness standards and other measures of competitiveness to meet diversity quotas.

Congressional committees of jurisdiction should look further into including a hearing before them as part of the process of officer promotion to the three- and four-star rank (much in the way of nominees for judgeships appear before Congress to attest to their impartiality and professional judgment in adjudicating cases) to make sure their political views are kept separate from their professional obligations.

4. **Any policy, training, budgetary priority, or procurement that does not directly support this mission is a distraction from it and therefore imperils Americans' security.** A corollary of the previous point is that any training, policy, budget line, or procurement effort that does not advance the military's core missions deviates from it. In terms of weapons systems, the military should adopt a broad and diversified defense industrial base, guided by investments in capabilities that could be critical in a range of future warfighting scenarios. Regarding training and curricula, particularly relating to non-military activities (e.g., workplace conduct), both uniformed and civilian personnel should focus on unity and comity in the office rather than the divisiveness fostered by "woke" training.

5. **A responsible defense budget must focus on how money is spent rather than how much money is spent.** Debates on increasing or decreasing the U.S. defense budget are common in our Nation's capital. This is likely a false choice. There is bloat in the Pentagon's bureaucracy, but an underfunded military in important areas guarantees that the military cannot succeed in meeting objectives. The primary consideration should always be what the funds are being invested for in the protection of our Nation. The defense budget, funded directly by the American people, demands stewardship of resources and proactive oversight of the funds needed to secure military objectives of today and tomorrow, not yesterday. A precise military budget focused on the strategies and force structure that outcompetes America's adversaries and protects the United States should guide America's defense budget. Careful consideration and stewardship-guided oversight should frame all policy decisions regarding the defense budget.