# 1AC---Herb---Round 6

## FULL TEXT

### 1AC---Foreign Service

#### Contention 1 is the Foreign Service:

#### Trump stripped their CBRs---but ping-ponging between injunctions and stays is inevitable.

Heller 25 [Lisa Heller, Professional Policy Issues Director at the American Foreign Service Association, “AFSA Under Attack—Administration Goes After Unions,” The Foreign Service Journal, September-October 2025, https://afsa.org/sites/default/files/flipping\_book/091025/68/]

Just one year ago, AFSA celebrated its 100th anniversary as the professional association of the Foreign Service. Since the 1970s, AFSA has also served as the official bargaining unit for Foreign Service members. The partnership between AFSA and the foreign affairs agencies—State, USAID, Commerce (FCS), Agriculture (FAS), the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), and Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS)—despite occasional disagreements, has generally been a mutually supportive one.

AFSA union attorneys and staff meet regularly with their agency counterparts to negotiate conditions of employment, including such matters as Foreign Service promotion precepts, grievance and disciplinary procedures, certain Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM) updates, and resolution discussions when laws or negotiated procedures have not been followed.

This mutual commitment to a system of collective bargaining has allowed the Foreign Service to do its job on behalf of the American people without fear of unfair treatment or political harassment.

What’s Changed This Year?

All that changed earlier this year. First came the unlawful dismantling of USAID. Then, on March 27, the White House issued an executive order (EO) banning nearly all federal union activity on the grounds of “national security,” despite the inability of the administration to cite one instance in which national security had been harmed due to union activity. The order covered Foreign Service members who work at State and USAID but not those at FCS, FAS, or USAGM.

The order had four immediate effects:

• Member dues are no longer deducted from employee paychecks and annuity payments. Most members relied on convenient deductions from paychecks or annuities to pay their member dues. Now, members must proactively go online and set up a direct payment mechanism.

• Elected full-time active-duty members of the AFSA Governing Board, including the president and agency vice presidents, can no longer use official time to serve in their AFSA roles.

In other words, individuals in those roles, who once would have been paneled into positions that allowed them to fulfill their AFSA assignments full-time, now have to retire or, in the case of those still on active duty, use only personal time to perform their AFSA duties. Not surprisingly, this vastly reduces the time available for AFSA representatives to per form work on behalf of AFSA members.

• AFSA lost access to its offices on the second floor of the Harry S Truman Building (HST). While AFSA does own its own building in the Foggy Bottom neighborhood (2101 E Street NW), the loss of space in HST makes it more difficult for members to connect with AFSA representatives and employment counselors in person.

• Human resources offices at the affected agencies, most particularly the Bureau of Global Talent Management (GTM, now PERT) at State, will no longer meet with AFSA on behalf of their members except when AFSA attorneys are representing members on individual matters. State Department officials will also no longer engage in those matters that were once the province of collective bargaining. This allowed the department’s unilateral changes to the Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM) on FS reductions in force (RIFs) and on anti-bullying.

The intent of the action was clear: By cutting access to space, staffing, and funds, the White House hoped to drive unions out of business and strip hundreds of thousands of employees of the right to representation they have relied on for decades.

The Unions Fight Back

By stopping all collective bargaining activity, the White House hoped to impose political conditions and loyalty tests on career diplomats and civil servants. By removing the safeguards that ensure fairness, transparency, and accountability in the workplace, this executive order politicizes Foreign Service assignments, evaluations, promotions, and more, without union input or oversight.

“This unprecedented and unprincipled attack on AFSA’s union activities is clearly designed to weaken protections for employees and to dismantle the safeguards that have protected our nonpartisan Foreign Service professionals,” said AFSA President John Dinkelman.

AFSA and other unions are fighting the order through legal action and in the court of public opinion.

On April 7, AFSA filed suit in the D.C. District Court (AFSA v. Trump et al., 1:25-cv-01030,D.D.C.), claiming that the president and his fellow defendants acted outside the scope of their authority in issuing and carrying out the March 27 executive order (EO), “Exclusions from Federal Labor Management Relations Programs,” and, separately, violated AFSA’s first amendment rights.

On May 14, following legal actions by both sides, the District Court granted AFSA’s motion for a preliminary injunction against the executive order that stripped Foreign Service members at the State Department and USAID of their right to union representation.

In other words, AFSA regained its status as a union at State and USAID. Although State was slow to restart its meetings, it finally did so. USAID did not agree to reengage before the agency was unilaterally dismantled.

Conversely, on June 20, the Court of Appeals granted the administration a stay on the District Court’s injunction. In other words, AFSA was once again legally prohibited from working as a union, and official meetings between the department and AFSA representatives on such topics as proposed updates to the FAM on RIFs were stopped.

Over the next several months, AFSA expects this uncertainty and “ping-ponging” to continue as unions and the administration continue to battle it out in the courts.

#### Surveys prove CBRs make-or-break diplomatic capacity and foreign policy effectiveness, ensuring failure to peacefully manage great power competition. They’re the only way to prevent the most competent FSOs from quitting, AND restore credibility with foreign counterparts.

Heller et al. 25 [Lisa Heller, Professional Policy Issues Director; Kim **Sullivan**, director of advocacy; Sean **O’Gorman**, advocacy and policy manager; Nikki **Gamer**, director of communications and outreach; Nadja **Ruzica**, deputy director of communications and outreach; Donna **Gorman**, deputy editor of The Foreign Service Journal; and Kathryn **Owens**, managing editor of The Foreign Service Journal; all at the American Foreign Service Association; “At the Breaking Point: The State of the U.S. Foreign Service in 2025,” American Foreign Service Association, 12-3-2025, https://afsa.org/sites/default/files/at-the-breaking-point-full-report.pdf]

The Big Picture

The global challenges facing the United States are more pressing than ever. From strategic competition with China and deliberate Russian aggression to the impacts of climate change, mass migration, and artificial intelligence, America’s safety and security require a strong presence on the world stage. Confronting these challenges demands a well-trained, nonpartisan corps of professionals dedicated to advancing U.S. interests, upholding its values, and cultivating the relationships essential to brokering peace.

That corps is the U.S. Foreign Service.

Established by the Rogers Act of 1924, the U.S. Foreign Service is America’s professional diplomatic corps. Hailing from all 50 states, these career professionals, often described as “the eyes and ears of America abroad,” represent the U.S. in more than 190 countries. These public servants operate in conflict zones and fragile states, often amid political unrest or natural disasters. You will find them negotiating peace agreements, responding to humanitarian crises, securing the release of detained Americans, issuing visas and passports, supporting U.S. businesses abroad, and explaining U.S. values and policies to foreign audiences.

Despite its outsized role in safeguarding U.S. interests, the Foreign Service is a comparatively small federal workforce. Up until this year, there were 17,000 employees across six federal agencies —slightly over 1 percent of the size of the active-duty U.S. military, at a cost of less than half a percent of the U.S. federal budget.3

[FIGURE OMITTED]

This lean workforce has historically operated across the U.S. Department of State; the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID); the Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS); the Foreign Commercial Service (FCS); the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS); and the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM).

From ambassadors to consular officers, management and security professionals, political and economic officers, public diplomacy experts, agricultural attachés, journalists, health and technology specialists, and more, the Foreign Service forms the backbone of America’s global presence. All Foreign Service members take an oath to uphold the U.S. Constitution and carry out their duties across presidential administrations, regardless of political party.

But even as these professionals continue to serve with dedication and distinction, the institution that supports and enables their work has come under unprecedented strain.

Early in 2025, both USAID and USAGM, key soft power agencies supporting global development and media, were dismantled, eliminating thousands of positions and critical diplomatic capabilities almost overnight. Then in July, the State Department laid off more than 200 members of the Foreign Service in a single day—the largest number of single-day layoffs in its history. More than 1,000 civil servants also lost their jobs on that day. These layoffs were done without consideration to merit, resulting in the firing of experts on the South China Sea [SCS], chemical and biological weapons [CBW], human rights, visa fraud, embassy security, economic policy, global agriculture, to name a few.

The consequences of these policy changes were starkly evident in the U.S. response to the devastating earthquake in Myanmar in March 2025. With USAID dismantled, the U.S. was limited to a small response team and a total aid pledge of approximately $9 million. In contrast, China rapidly deployed multiple rescue teams and pledged more than $137 million in relief and reconstruction aid— around 15 times the U.S. contribution. Prior to this administration, China had already surpassed the U.S. in diplomatic capacity, expanding their global presence just as the United States scaled back its own.

More cuts are yet to come

The president’s Fiscal Year 2026 budget request represents another sharp contraction in U.S. global engagement. In the coming year, the administration plans to eliminate most contributions to international peacekeeping, cut humanitarian assistance by 60 percent, and slash economic development by nearly 70 percent. The task of implementing these cuts, and managing the diplomatic fallout, will inevitably adversely affect members of the U.S. Foreign Service, professionals who are already being asked to do more with fewer resources and shrinking institutional capacity.

These rollbacks would be in addition to recent unilateral changes to the Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM), the official rulebook for U.S. diplomats on the job, and the introduction of a new category in employee evaluations that requires a rating on the employee’s “fidelity” to the administration. At the same time, the collective bargaining rights for much of the Foreign Service have been stripped by executive order. Together, these changes are politicizing a workforce long respected for its nonpartisan professionalism. Such measures erode the bedrock principle that U.S. diplomacy is guided by the Constitution rather than political allegiance. The Foreign Service is an essential part of the government workforce. It is on the front lines of U.S. global leadership. Its well-trained, multilingual members are among the most adaptable, mission-driven professionals in public service—with years of specialized knowledge and experience. When this critical workforce is sidelined and its ranks hollowed and politicized, America’s ability to lead, respond, and compete on the world stage is diminished. Americans will ultimately pay the price for this unforced error.

About This Report

“At the Breaking Point: The State of the U.S. Foreign Service in 2025” is based on findings from AFSA’s global survey of its active-duty membership conducted electronically between August and September 2025 and distributed exclusively to AFSA members. More than 2,100 members responded, representing a diverse cross section of the Service—from entry-level officers to senior leaders, from Washington-based staff to those at posts worldwide.

In the absence of a federal government workforce survey—which was discontinued earlier this year—AFSA undertook this research to document the experiences, challenges, and perspectives of America’s career diplomats at a moment of profound institutional stress.

As both the professional association and labor union for the U.S. Foreign Service, AFSA is uniquely positioned to assess the state of the diplomatic workforce. Its membership includes active-duty personnel from the remaining foreign affairs agencies and retired personnel from all agencies, providing an unparalleled view into the health and capacity of the Service.

This report draws on both quantitative and qualitative data from the survey to provide a comprehensive picture of the Foreign Service in 2025. It reflects not only the numbers behind the crisis but also the voices of those who carry out U.S. foreign policy every day on behalf of the American people.

Findings

Eroding Capacity to Deliver U.S. Foreign Policy

AFSA’s 2025 survey reveals a Foreign Service workforce struggling to fulfill its mission amid unprecedented political and budgetary pressures. Across the board, career diplomats report that the conditions necessary for effective U.S. diplomacy are rapidly eroding.

An overwhelming 86 percent of respondents said that recent policy changes have negatively affected their ability to implement the foreign policy of the United States. Only 1 percent reported any improvement.

The effects are being felt in every corner of U.S. diplomacy: 78 percent of respondents reported operating under reduced budgets; 64 percent said key projects and initiatives are being delayed or suspended; 61 percent are managing significantly heavier workloads due to staffing losses; and 46 percent report new obstacles in negotiating with foreign counterparts. These challenges stem from diminished credibility, shifting directives, and resource shortfalls.

Respondents identified several core areas of U.S. foreign policy in which capacity has been especially weakened: development and humanitarian assistance (59 percent); public diplomacy (56 percent); national safety initiatives (52 percent); and economic and trade promotion (37 percent). These are the pillars of America’s global engagement, each weakened by the constraints now facing the diplomatic workforce.

A Workforce in Freefall

Among our survey respondents, an alarming 98 percent reported somewhat or significantly reduced morale in the workplace since January.

Additionally, one-third reported that they have considered leaving the Service early since January.

Among those who are considering leaving the Service, 75 percent cited declining workplace morale; 59 percent cited the loss of workplace protections or benefits; 56 percent noted reduced resources to do their jobs; and 54 percent cited negative political influence at work.

Brain Drain

Diplomacy was once a lifelong calling.

For generations, Foreign Service members dedicated their entire careers to advancing U.S. interests abroad. In AFSA’s 2025 survey, 81 percent of respondents said they entered the Service intending to serve 20 years or more. Today, that commitment is wavering. Only about half of those say their plans haven’t changed, and nearly one-third said they have changed their minds since January 2025. By contrast, in AFSA’s 2022 survey, only one in four respondents said they might leave before completing a full career.

The difference in just three years speaks to a growing sense that the Foreign Service has become untenable for many of its members. The numbers do not capture those whose careers were cut short involuntarily, through reductions in force, politically motivated dismissals, or agency closures beyond their control.

Among those who remain, the reasons for reconsidering a career in diplomacy are clear: 65 percent cited the politicization of the workforce, while 41 percent pointed to fear of being personally targeted. Roughly 57 percent referenced circumstances beyond their control, and 30 percent noted a broader decline in public respect for government service.

This loss is reflected in the numbers of those who are planning to depart the Service early. Historically, less than 5 percent of the Foreign Service retire every year on average. By comparison, 9 percent of those surveyed plan to leave the Service this year— and that doesn’t count the hundreds who departed in the first nine months of 2025 and were not included in the survey. An additional 21 percent say they plan to leave in the next couple of years.

When asked what might persuade them to stay, respondents emphasized a desire for a return to pre-2025 professional norms, including restored workplace protections and depoliticized assignments. Nearly half said that such a restoration, along with stronger career and promotion opportunities, would influence their decision to remain.

This sense of loss is particularly poignant given the ideals that drew most into the Foreign Service in the first place. More than 80 percent said they joined out of a commitment to public service and to advancing U.S. interests and values around the world. Many were also motivated by the opportunity to use their cultural knowledge and foreign language skills to serve the American people—a hallmark of professional diplomacy.

When asked whether they would choose this career again, 62 percent said yes, 32 percent said maybe, and 6 percent said no.

Taken together, these responses paint a sobering picture of a once-stable profession, now shaken by uncertainty, frustration, and disillusionment.

Policy Priorities

Survey respondents identified a series of urgent priorities aimed at restoring the integrity, independence, and effectiveness of the U.S. Foreign Service. Their responses reveal deep concern that the career structure of American diplomacy—the framework that has sustained a professional, nonpartisan corps for more than a century—is being systematically weakened.

At the top of the list is protecting the Foreign Service career path itself. Respondents voiced alarm over the replacement of career positions with political appointees, widespread budget reductions across the foreign affairs agencies, and the erosion of the merit-based systems that govern assignments and promotions. They also called for greater protection of the Foreign Service performance review process, the integrity of the assignments system, and fair retirement and benefits policies.

In open-ended responses, more than 380 members elaborated on their concerns. The most common appeals were to reverse ongoing reductions in force, prevent additional layoffs, reform the employee review processes and assignments systems to ensure fairness and transparency, and reinstate collective bargaining rights—an essential mechanism for safeguarding the workforce’s voice within government.

Survey participants were particularly troubled by recent procedural changes that appear to politicize or weaken professional standards. Among the most alarming was the introduction of a new “fidelity” or loyalty category for employee evaluations, which 77 percent cited as a major or moderate concern, and the sweeping changes to the Foreign Affairs Manual, the Foreign Service administrative manual, which were noted by 86 percent. Other controversial developments include the use of directed assignments, the cancellation of detail assignments, and the elimination of the annuity exception, which provided an earned annuity to those forced out of the Service before full retirement age.

Respondents were equally clear about what must be preserved to sustain the Foreign Service’s professional corps. Nearly all—an overwhelming 98 percent—rated nonpartisanship as “important” or “very important.” Other key priorities included maintaining opportunities for advancement into senior leadership roles, preserving collective bargaining rights, ensuring a fair and transparent grievance process, and protecting the Service’s rotational assignment system and training pipeline for new officers.

Together, these findings reflect a workforce deeply alarmed by the erosion of the systems that have long upheld their professionalism. The message from America’s diplomats is clear: Safeguarding the integrity of the career Foreign Service is essential to safeguarding the nation’s capacity to lead.

AFSA’s Policy Recommendations

The findings of this survey demonstrate that the U.S. Foreign Service—the professional, nonpartisan corps that carries out U.S. foreign policy—is in crisis. Congress has a critical role to play in restoring its effectiveness, protecting its independence, and ensuring that the U.S. can meet the global challenges of the 21st century.

AFSA urges Congress to;

Protect the Nonpartisan Career Foreign Service

Career diplomats are sworn to represent the United States faithfully under presidents of either party. Yet in recent months, the politicization of the Foreign Service has reached alarming levels—undermining both morale and the credibility of U.S. diplomacy. AFSA calls on Congress to reaffirm, through legislation, the core principle of a merit-based, nonpartisan diplomatic service. Congress should make clear that career professionals cannot be punished, reassigned, or dismissed for political reasons, and that their expertise and judgment must remain protected from partisan interference. America’s foreign policy cannot succeed if its diplomats are treated as political pawns.

Reassert Congressional Oversight of U.S. Foreign Policy and the Foreign Service

The dismantling of key agencies, sweeping personnel actions, and major shifts in foreign policy over the past year have occurred with little congressional consultation or transparency. AFSA urges Congress to conduct robust and sustained oversight of the executive branch’s management of the Foreign Service and the broader foreign affairs enterprise. Regular hearings, reporting requirements, and accountability mechanisms are essential to ensure that U.S. diplomacy remains grounded in law, professionalism, and the national interest. Restoring balance between the branches of government is vital to the health of U.S. foreign policy.

Work to Strengthen the Foreign Service as an Institution and Prepare Its Personnel

The Foreign Service must evolve to meet the challenges of great power competition and technological disruption. But reform must be undertaken in partnership with the workforce, not imposed on it. As the elected representative of the career Foreign Service, AFSA stands ready to partner with the foreign affairs agencies and Congress on reforms that modernize training, assignments, and promotion systems, and strengthen leadership development. True modernization means empowering U.S. diplomats to operate effectively in a complex global environment while preserving the institutional values that make the Foreign Service unique: professionalism, integrity, and service to country above politics.

Conclusion

AFSA’s 2025 workforce survey reveals a stark truth: America’s professional diplomatic corps, long one of the country’s greatest strategic assets, is under extraordinary strain. The numbers tell a story of deep loss, as one in four Foreign Service members has left or been removed since January and nearly every remaining diplomat reports diminished morale and capacity to carry out U.S. foreign policy. Behind these numbers are dedicated public servants who have spent their careers advancing U.S. interests abroad and safeguarding the country’s safety and stability.

Their message is clear: The damage to U.S. diplomatic institutions threatens its leadership in the world. The hollowing out of the Foreign Service, the politicization of its ranks, the diminishing of career professionals, and the dismantling of once-vital agencies have weakened the nation’s ability to respond to crises, manage alliances, and promote stability and prosperity.

Yet the survey also underscores the resilience and professionalism of those who remain. Despite extraordinary challenges, U.S. diplomats continue to serve with dedication and courage in every corner of the world. They are asking to be heard and to be given the tools, protections, and respect necessary to do their jobs on behalf of the American people.

Restoring the strength of U.S. diplomacy requires immediate action. Congress must reaffirm its constitutional role in overseeing foreign policy, protect the nonpartisan nature of the Foreign Service as an institution, and work with AFSA to rebuild and modernize a diplomatic corps equipped for the realities of 21st-century global competition. The effectiveness of U.S. foreign policy depends on it.

At its core, this report is not merely a dataset but a warning from those who know the stakes best: the men and women who represent the United States abroad. They are sounding the alarm not for themselves but for their country.

#### Especially for FSOs in the U.S.

Dinkelman 25 [John W. Dinkelman, 40 years of distinguished service at the Department of State, including as acting Assistant Secretary of State for Administration and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Logistics Management, current president of the American Foreign Service Association, “Trump’s State Department Cuts Are a Self-Inflicted Wound,” Foreign Policy, 8-14-2025, https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/08/14/state-department-reform-trump-rubio-layoffs-afsa/]

There is broad consensus in the foreign affairs community that operational procedures do need reform—if only to streamline the infamous clearance process or clarify the division of oversight between regional and functional bureaus. But the Trump administration’s chaotic firing of the very subject-matter experts who could most effectively bring about such changes is a prime example of mismanagement at its worst.

AFSA has seen past administrations execute good reforms—ones that made the department nimbler, smarter, and better. These were marked by careful planning, broad consultation, and a focus on strengthening diplomats’ ability to serve the American people. For example, in 1999, after a careful review process, the Clinton administration consolidated the U.S. Information Agency and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency into the State Department with minimal disruption. Leadership provided ample notice to all parties involved, sought (and received) input from them, and obtained their buy-in to assure a smooth transition of critical functions.

This latest round of reforms had none of those qualities. It was fast, chaotic, and more about making headlines than making the department stronger. The Trump administration’s diplomatic shake-up did not just unsettle people in Foggy Bottom—it left the United States weaker, less respected, and less safe.

Kroenig’s portrayal of a bloated Washington bureaucracy misses the mark. The State Department’s growth over the past two decades—under leadership of both political parties—has been commensurate with the mounting threats to U.S. national security and directly tied to national priorities: opening embassies to counter China, hiring more consular officers to meet record demand for passports and visas, and adding experts in cybersecurity and conflict prevention.

Kroenig correctly noted that U.S. diplomats are the “pointy end of the spear” of U.S. foreign policy. But it is subject-matter experts in Washington who aim that spear by analyzing intelligence, assessing U.S. priorities, and directing government resources. In one fell swoop, the department’s leadership undermined their ability to do just that.

Also misleading is Kroenig’s claim that the State Department did not cut any foreign service officers based overseas. I’ve heard from laid-off officers who shared concerning stories that counter this narrative.

One officer in Turkey was managing a crucial visa operation that served applicants from Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. On July 11, they were cut off from their phone and email with no plane ticket home. That office now has no dedicated manager. Another officer was set to lead the U.S. Embassy in Tonga as chargé d’affaires—a strategically important post in the Pacific. They had travel orders and tickets in hand. But on July 11, they were out of a job, leaving the embassy in Tongo leaderless at a time when China is expanding its influence in the region.

Turkey and Tonga are not isolated cases. Around the world, key posts and offices from Senegal to China have been left leaderless in the same abrupt, damaging fashion. Even the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv—one of the highest priority posts—was not spared from cuts.

Kroenig downplayed the State Department’s 1,350 layoffs as just a sliver of an 80,000-person organization. But that number includes more than 50,000 locally hired staff overseas, who are vital to U.S. missions but not part of the Washington-based policy core. (No locally hired overseas staff were part of the July 11 layoffs, according to AFSA’s tallies.) Measured against the actual U.S.-based workforce—which numbered about 17,600 in 2024—the cuts amount to nearly 8 percent. That does more than just trim the fat—it cuts into muscle and bone. Shedding staff in this manner is the difference between a department that can still function and one that can’t.

#### Diplomatic failure in great power competition is existential: through nuclear and biological wars both intentional and inadvertent, and collective inaction on future weapons, AI, pandemics and climate.

Clare 25 [Stephen Clare, Research Manager at the Center for the Governance of AI, former Senior Research Associate at the Centre for International Governance Innovation, MSc McGill University, BA McMaster University, “Great power conflict,” 80,000 Hours, last updated March 2025, first published June 2023, https://80000hours.org/problem-profiles/great-power-conflict/] \*[modifications in brackets]

At some point in the 21st century, an unwinnable war may be fought.

A modern great power war could see weapons of mass destruction [WMD] deployed on an unprecedented scale. The rapid advance of AI could increase the risk and enable the creation of unprecedented catastrophic power.

It would probably be the most destructive event in history, shattering our world. It could even threaten us with extinction.

We’ve come perilously close to just this kind of catastrophe before.

On October 27, 1962 — near the peak of the Cuban Missile Crisis — an American U-2 reconnaissance plane set out on a routine mission to the Arctic to collect data on Soviet nuclear tests. But, while flying near the North Pole, with the stars obscured by the northern lights, the pilot made a navigation error and strayed into Soviet airspace.1

Soviet commanders sent fighter jets to intercept the American plane. The jets were picked up by American radar operators and nuclear-armed F-102 fighters took off to protect the U-2.

Fortunately, the reconnaissance pilot realised his error with enough time to correct course before the Soviet and American fighters met. But the intrusion enraged Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, who was already on high alert amidst the crisis in Cuba.

“What is this, a provocation?” Khrushchev wrote to US President John F. Kennedy. “One of your planes violates our frontier during this anxious time when everything has been put into combat readiness.”

If the U-2’s path had strayed further west, or the Soviet fighters had been fast enough to intercept it, this incident could have played out quite differently. Both the United States and the USSR had thousands of nuclear missiles ready to fire. Instead of a nearly-forgotten anecdote, the U-2 incident could have been a trigger for war, like the assassination of Franz Ferdinand.

Competition among the world’s most powerful countries shapes our world today. And whether it’s through future incidents like the lost U-2, or something else entirely, it’s plausible that it could escalate and lead to a major, devastating war.

Is there anything you can do to help avoid such a terrible outcome? It is, of course, difficult to imagine how any one individual can hope to influence such world-historical events. Even the most powerful world leaders often fail to predict the global consequences of their decisions.

But I think the likelihood and severity of great power war makes this among the most pressing problems of our time. The prospect of international competition in advanced AI may increase the peril. And some opportunities to lower the risk could be highly promising to work on.

In short, there are actions we can take to navigate a particularly perilous time – and perhaps even reduce the threat of great power war for future generations.

Summary

Economic growth and technological progress have bolstered the arsenals of the world’s most powerful countries. That means the next war between them could be far worse than World War II, the deadliest conflict humanity has yet experienced.

Could such a war actually occur? We can’t rule out the possibility. Technical accidents or diplomatic misunderstandings could spark a conflict that quickly escalates. International tension could cause leaders to decide they’re better off fighting than negotiating. And rapidly advancing AI may change the way wars are fought and lead to dangerous geopolitical upheaval.

It seems hard to make progress on this problem. It’s also less neglected than some of the problems that we think are most pressing. There are certain issues, like making nuclear weapons or military artificial intelligence systems safer, which seem promising — although it may be more impactful to work directly on reducing risks from AI, bioweapons or nuclear weapons directly. You might also be able to reduce the chances of misunderstandings and miscalculations by developing expertise in one of the most important bilateral relationships (such as that between the United States and China).

Finally, by making conflict less likely, reducing competitive pressure, and improving international cooperation, you might be helping to reduce other risks, like the chance of future pandemics.

Our overall view

Recommended

We think this is among the top problems we’ll face as humanity develops advanced AI systems. If you have good personal fit, working on this problem could be your most impactful path.

Scale

There’s a significant chance that a new great power war occurs this century.

Although the world’s most powerful countries haven’t fought directly since World War II, war has been a constant throughout human history. There have been numerous close calls, and several geopolitical issues could cause diplomatic disputes in the years to come.

At the same time, advanced AI technology also has the potential to dramatically change the global balance of power in ways that enhance the risk.

These considerations, along with forecasts and statistical models, lead me to think there’s about a one-in-three chance that a new great power war breaks out in roughly the next 30 years.

Few wars cause more than a million casualties, and the next great power war would probably be smaller than that. However, there’s some chance it could escalate massively. Great powers already have much larger economies, more powerful weapons, and bigger military budgets than they did in the past. AI may further supercharge all three, while also increasing the speed and scale at which wars can be fought. An all-out war could kill far more people than even World War II, the worst war we’ve yet experienced.

Could it become an existentially threatening war — one that could cause human extinction or significantly damage the prospects of the long-term future? It’s very difficult to say. But my best current guess is that the chance of an existential catastrophe directly due to war in the next century is somewhere between 0.05% and 2%.

Neglectedness

War is a lot less neglected than some of our other top problems. There are thousands of people in governments, think tanks, and universities already working on this problem. But some solutions or approaches remain neglected. One particularly promising approach is to develop expertise at the intersection of international conflict and another of our top problems. Experts who understand both geopolitical dynamics and risks from advanced artificial intelligence, for example, are sorely needed.

Solvability

Reducing the risk of great power war seems very difficult. But there are specific technical problems that can be solved to make weapons systems safer or less likely to trigger catastrophic outcomes. And in the best case, working on this problem can have a leverage effect, making the development of several dangerous technologies safer by improving international cooperation and making them less likely to be deployed in war.

At the end of this profile, I suggest five issues which I’d be particularly excited to see people work on. These are:

Developing expertise in the riskiest bilateral relationships

Learning how to manage international crises quickly and effectively and ensuring the systems to do so are properly maintained

Doing research to improve particularly important foreign policies, like strategies for sanctions and deterrence

Improving how nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction [WMD] are governed at the international level

Improving how such weapons are controlled at the national level

Profile depth

In-depth

This is one of many profiles we've written to help people find the most pressing problems they can solve with their careers. Learn more about how we compare different problems and see how this problem compares to the others we've considered so far.

Why might preventing great power war be an especially pressing problem?

A modern great power war — an all-out conflict between the world’s most powerful countries — could be the worst thing to ever happen to humanity.

Historically, such wars have been exceptionally destructive. Sixty-six million people died in World War II, likely the deadliest catastrophe humanity has experienced so far.

Since World War II, the global population and world economy have continued to grow, nuclear weapons have proliferated, and military technology has continued to advance. This means the next world war could be even worse, just as World War II was much deadlier than World War I.

It’s not guaranteed that such a war will break out. And if it does, it may not escalate to such a terrible extent. But the chance can’t be ignored. In fact, there are reasons to think that the odds of World War III breaking out this century are worryingly high.

A modern great power war would be devastating for people alive today. But its effects could also persist long into the future. That’s because there is a substantial chance that this century proves to be particularly important. Technologies with the potential to cause a global catastrophe or radically reshape society are likely to be invented. How we choose to develop and deploy them could impact huge numbers of our descendants. And these choices would be affected by the outcomes of a major war.

To be more specific, there are three main ways great power conflict could affect the long-term future:

High international tension could increase other dangers, such as catastrophic risk from AI. Great power tensions could make the world more dangerous even if they don’t lead to war. During the Cold War, for example, the United States and the USSR never came into direct conflict but invested in bioweapons research and built up nuclear arsenals. This dynamic could return, with tension between great powers fueling races to develop and build new weapons, raising the risk of a disaster even before shots are fired.

War could cause an existential catastrophe. If war does break out, it could escalate dramatically, with modern weapons (nuclear weapons, bioweapons, autonomous weapons, or other future technologies) deployed at unprecedented scale. The resulting destruction could irreparably damage humanity’s prospects.

War could reshape international institutions and power balances. While such a catastrophic war is possible, it seems extremely unlikely. But even a less deadly war, such as another conflict on the scale of World War II, could have very long-lasting effects. For example, it could reshape international institutions and the global balance of power. In a pivotal century, different institutional arrangements and geopolitical balances could cause humanity to follow different long-term trajectories.

The rest of this profile explores exactly how pressing a problem great power conflict is. In summary:

Great power relations have become more tense. (More.)

Partly as a result, a war is more likely than you might think. It’s reasonable to put the probability of such a conflict in the coming decades somewhere between 10% and 50%. (More.)

If war breaks out, it would probably be hard to control escalation. The chance that it would become large enough to be an existential risk cannot be dismissed. (More.)

Competition over AI may increase the chance of conflict, and advanced AI systems may make any resulting war more likely to be devastating. (More.)

This makes great power conflict one of the biggest threats our species currently faces. (More.)

It seems hard to make progress on solving such a difficult problem (more) — but there are many things you can try if you want to help (more).

International tension has risen and makes other problems worse

Imagine we had a thermometer-like device which, instead of measuring temperature, measured the level of international tension.2 This ‘tension metre’ would max out during periods of all-out global war, like World War II. And it would be relatively low when the great powers3 were peaceful and cooperative. For much of the post-Napoleonic 1800s, for example, the powerful European nations instituted the Concert of Europe and mostly upheld a continental peace. The years following the fall of the USSR also seem like a time of relative calm, when the tension metre would have been quite low.4

How much more worried would you be about the coming decades if you knew the tension metre would be very high than if you knew it would be low? Probably quite a lot. In the worst case, of course, the great powers could come into direct conflict. But even if it doesn’t lead to war, a high level of tension between great powers could accelerate the development of new strategic technologies, make it harder to solve global problems like climate change, and undermine international institutions.

During the Cold War, for instance, the United States and USSR avoided coming into direct conflict. But the tension metre would still have been pretty high. This led to some dangerous events:

A nuclear arms race. The number of nuclear warheads in the world grew from just 300 in 1950 to over 64,000 in 1986.

The development of new bioweapons. Despite signing the Biological Weapons Convention in 1972, the search for military advantages motivated Soviet decision makers to continue investing in bioweapon development for decades. Although never used in combat, biological agents were accidentally released from research facilities, resulting in dozens of deaths and threatening to cause a pandemic.5

Nuclear close calls. Military accidents and false alarms happened regularly, and top decision makers were more likely to interpret these events hostilely when tensions were high. On several occasions it seems the decision about whether or not to start a nuclear war came down to individuals acting under stress and with limited time.

This makes international tension an existential risk factor. It’s connected to a number of other problems, which means reducing the level of international tension would lower the total amount of existential risk we face.

The level of tension today

Recently, international tension seems to have once again been rising. To highlight some of the most salient examples:

China-United States relations have deteriorated, leading to increased competition in trade, geopolitical influence, and AI technology.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has resulted in an estimated one million people killed or wounded, raised the risk of nuclear war, and sent United States-Russia relations to their lowest point since the Cold War.

Chinese and Indian soldiers fought deadly skirmishes along their countries’ disputed border in 2020–21.

These dynamics raise an important question: how much more dangerous is the world given this higher tension than it would be in a world of low tension?

I think the answer is quite a bit more dangerous — for several reasons.

First, international tension seems likely to make technological progress more dangerous. There’s a good chance that, in the coming decades, humanity will make some major technological breakthroughs. We’ve discussed, for example, why one might worry about the effects of advanced artificial intelligence systems or biotechnology. The level of tension could strongly affect how these technologies are developed and governed. Tense relations could, for example, cause countries to neglect safety concerns in order to develop technology faster.6

Second, great power relations will strongly influence how nations do, or do not, cooperate to solve other global collective action problems. For example, in 2022, China withdrew from bilateral negotiations with the United States over climate action in protest of what it perceived as American diplomatic aggression in Taiwan. That same year, efforts to strengthen the Biological Weapons Convention were reportedly hampered by the Russian delegation after their country’s invasion of Ukraine raised tensions with the United States and other western countries.

Third, the rapid development of AI raises a range of challenges. It’s already a potential aggravator of existing tensions and competitive dynamics, such as those between the US and China, since countries may believe that obtaining powerful AI technology will give them advantages over their rivals. This can create the apparent incentive to race toward the technology, which can worsen tensions. And the competition likely makes it harder to cooperatively reduce the potentially catastrophic risks raised by advanced AI.

Finally, if relations deteriorate severely, the great powers could fight a war.

How likely is a war?

Wars are destructive and risky for all countries involved. Modern weapons, especially nuclear warheads, make starting a great power war today seem like a suicidal undertaking.

But factors like the prevalence of war throughout history, the chance that leaders make mistakes, conflicting ideologies, and commitment problems, make me think that conflict could break out anyway.

On balance, I think such an event is somewhat unlikely but hardly unthinkable. To quantify this: I put the chance we experience some kind of war between great powers before 2050 at about one-in-three.7

War has occurred regularly in the past

One reason to think a war is quite likely is that such conflicts have been so common in the past. Over the past 500 years, about two great power wars have occurred per century.8

Naively, this would mean that every year there’s a 2% chance such a war occurs, implying the chance of experiencing at least one great power war over the next 80 years — roughly until the end of the century — is about 80%.9

This is a very simple model. In reality, the risk is not constant over time and independent across years. But it shows that if past trends simply continue, the outcome is likely to be very bad.

Has great power conflict become less likely?

One of the most important criticisms of this model is that it assumes the risk is constant over time. Some researchers have argued instead that, especially since the end of World War II, major conflicts have become much less likely due to:

Nuclear deterrence: Nuclear weapons are so powerful and destructive that it’s just too costly for nuclear-armed countries to start wars against each other.10

Democratisation: Democracies have almost never gone to war against each other, perhaps because democracies are more interconnected and their leaders are under more public pressure to peacefully resolve disputes with each other.11 The proportion of countries that are democratic has increased from under 10% in 1945 to about 50% today.

Strong economic growth and global trade: Global economic growth accelerated following World War II and the value of global exports grew by a factor of almost 30 between 1950 and 2014. Since war disrupts economies and international trade, strong growth raises the costs of fighting.12

The spread of international institutions: Multilateral bodies like the United Nations General Assembly and Security Council promote diplomatic dialogue and facilitate coordination to punish transgressors.13

It is true that we are living through an unusually long period of great power peace. It’s been about 80 years since World War II. We just saw that a simple model using the historical frequency of great power wars suggests there was only a 20% chance of going that long without at least one more war breaking out. This is some evidence in favour of the idea that wars have become significantly less common.

[FIGURE OMITTED]

At the same time, we shouldn’t feel too optimistic.

The numerous close calls during the Cold War suggest we were somewhat lucky to avoid a major war in that time. And a 20% chance of observing 80 years of peace is not that low.14 Structural changes might have dramatically reduced the likelihood of war. Or perhaps we’ve just been lucky. It could even be that technological advances have made war less likely to break out, but more deadly when it occurs, leaving the overall effect on the level of risk ambiguous. It just hasn’t been long enough to support a decisive view.15

So while the recent historical trend is somewhat encouraging, we don’t have nearly enough data to be confident that great power war is a thing of the past. To better predict the likelihood of future conflict, we should also consider distinctive features of our modern world.16

One might think that a modern great power war would simply be so destructive that no state leader would ever choose to start one. And some researchers do think that the destruction such a war would wreak globally makes it less likely to occur. But it would be hard to find anyone who claims this dynamic has driven the risk to zero.

First, a war could be started by accident.

Second, sometimes even prudent leaders may struggle to avoid a slide towards war.

We could blunder into war

An accidental war can occur if one side mistakes some event as an aggressive action by an adversary.

This happened several times during the Cold War. The earlier example of the wayward American reconnaissance plane shows how routine military exercises carry some escalation risk. Similarly, throughout history, nervous pilots and captains have caused serious incidents by attacking civilian planes and ships.17 Nuclear weapons allow for massive retaliatory strikes to be launched quickly — potentially too quickly to allow for such situations to be explained and de-escalated.

It is perhaps more likely, though, that an accidental war could be triggered by a technological malfunction. Faulty computers and satellites have previously triggered nuclear close calls. As monitoring systems have become more reliable, the rate at which such accidents have occurred has been going down. But it would be overconfident to think that technological malfunctions have become impossible.

Future technological changes will likely raise new challenges for nuclear weapon control. There may be pressure to integrate artificial intelligence systems into nuclear command and control to allow for faster data processing and decision making. And AI systems are known to behave unexpectedly when deployed in new environments.18

New technologies will also create new accident risks of their own, even if they’re not connected to nuclear weapon systems. Although these risks are hard to predict, they seem significant. I’ll say more about how such technologies — including AI, nuclear, biological, and autonomous weapons — are likely to increase war risks later.

Leaders could choose war

All that said, most wars have not started by accident. If another great power war does break out in the coming decades, it is more likely to be an intentional decision made by a national leader.

Explaining why someone might make such a costly, destructive, unpredictable, and risky decision has been called “the central puzzle about war.” It has motivated researchers to search for “rationalist” explanations for war. In his 2022 book Why We Fight, for example, economist Chris Blattman proposes five basic explanations: unchecked interests, intangible incentives, uncertainty, commitment problems, and misperceptions.19

Blattman's Five (Rationalist) Explanations for War

This section discusses how great power tensions may escalate to war in the next few decades. It focuses on three potential conflicts in particular: war between the US and China, between the US and Russia, and between China and India. These are discussed because each of these countries are among the world’s largest economies and military spenders, and seem particularly likely to fight. At the end, I briefly touch on other potential large conflicts.

[FIGURE OMITTED]

United States-China

The most worrying possibility is war between the United States and China. They are easily the world’s largest economies. They spend by far the most on their militaries. Their diplomatic relations are tense and have recently worsened. And their relationship has several of the characteristics that Blattman identifies as causes of war.

At the core of the United States-China relationship is a commitment problem.

China’s economy is growing faster than the United States’. By some metrics, it is already larger.20 If its differential growth continues, the gap will continue to widen between it and the United States. While economic power is not the sole determinant of military power, it is a key factor.21

The United States and China may be able to strike a fair deal today. But as China continues to grow faster, that deal may come to seem unbalanced. Historically, such commitment problems seem to have made these kinds of transition periods particularly dangerous.22

In practice, the United States and China may find it hard to agree on rules to guide their interactions, such as how to run international institutions or govern areas of the world where their interests overlap.

The most obvious issue which could tip the United States-China relationship from tension into war is a conflict over Taiwan. Taiwan’s location and technology industries are valuable for both great powers.

This issue is further complicated by intangible incentives.

For the United States, it is also a conflict over democratic ideals and the United States’ reputation for defending its allies.

For China, it is also a conflict about territorial integrity and addressing what are seen as past injustices.

Still, forecasts suggest that while a conflict is certainly possible, it is far from inevitable. As of 8 June 2023, one aggregated forecast23 gives a 17% chance of a United States-China war breaking out before 2035.24

A related aggregated forecast of the chance that at least 100 deaths occur in conflict between China and Taiwan by 2050 gives it, as of 8 June 2023, a much higher 68% chance of occurring.25

United States-Russia

Russia is the United States’ other major geopolitical rival.

Unlike China, Russia is not a rival in economic terms: even after adjusting for purchasing power, its economy is only about one-fifth the size of the United States’.

However, Russia devotes a substantial fraction of its economy to its military. Crucially, it has the world’s largest nuclear arsenal. And Russian leadership has shown a willingness to project power beyond their country’s borders.

[TABLE OMITTED]

Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine demonstrated the dangers of renewed rivalry between Russia and the United States-led West. The war has already been hugely destructive: the largest war in Europe since World War II, with hundreds of thousands of casualties already and no end to the conflict in sight. And it could get much worse. Most notably, Russian officials have repeatedly refused to rule out the use of nuclear weapons.

Unchecked interests and intangible incentives are again at play here. Vladimir Putin leads a highly-centralised government. He has spoken about how his desire to rebuild Russia’s reputation played in his decision to invade Ukraine.

Given their ideological differences and history of rivalry, it is reasonable to expect that the United States and Russia will continue to experience dangerous disagreements in the future. As of 8 June 2023, an aggregated forecast gives a 20% chance that the United States and Russia will fight a war involving at least 1,000 battle deaths before 2050.

China-India

India is already the world’s third-largest economy. If national growth rates remain roughly constant, the size of the Indian economy will surpass that of the United States’ sometime this century. India also has nuclear weapons and is already the world’s third-largest military spender (albeit at a much lower level than China or the United States).

One reason to worry that China and India could fight a war is that they already dispute territory along their border. Countries that share a border, especially when it is disputed, are more likely to go to war than countries that do not. By one count, 88% of the wars that occurred between 1816 and 1980 began as wars between neighbours.26

In fact, China and India already fought a brief but violent border war in 1962. Deadly skirmishes have continued since, resulting in deaths as recently as 2020.

Forecasters agree that a China-India conflict seems relatively (though not absolutely) likely. An aggregated forecast gives a 19% chance of war before 2035.

Other dangerous conflicts

These three conflicts — United States-China, United States-Russia, and China-India — are not the only possible great power wars that could occur. Other potential conflicts could also pose existential risk, either because they drive dangerous arms races or see widespread deployment of dangerous weapons.

We should keep in mind India-Pakistan as a particularly likely conflict between nuclear-armed states and China-Russia as a potential, though unlikely, conflict between great powers with a disputed border and history of war. Plus, new great powers may emerge or current great powers may fade in the years to come.

While I think we should prioritise the three potential conflicts I’ve highlighted above, the future is highly uncertain. We should monitor geopolitical changes and be open to changing our priorities in the future.

#### Failure to expertly manage Venezuelan stabilization by diplomatic proxy bogs down U.S. troops in protracted factional violence.

Busby 26 [Joshua Busby, Nonresident Senior Fellow, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy, Chicago Council on Global Affairs, “A Pretext for Securing Access to Oil,” What Trump’s Attack on Venezuela Means for the Region and the World, Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 1-3-2026, https://globalaffairs.org/commentary/analysis/what-trumps-attack-venezuela-means-region-and-world]

In moments like this one, scholars often look to historical analogies for what might come next. The most recent experiences from the United States and international partners reveal that while regime change may be easy, subsequent stabilization and nation-building are hard. Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya are instructive examples and have contributed to widespread pessimism about regime change in the academic community.

If one is looking for a best-case scenario, analysts might point to the US invasion of Panama in 1989, when the United States seized the country’s dictator Manuel Noriega on charges of drug trafficking. However, Panama has a far smaller population and territory compared to Venezuela.

It remains unclear whether the United States will own what comes next in Venezuela, especially if the country descends into factional violence, which we have seen in other countries after the top leadership is ousted. Washington’s capacity to manage and support a transition in Venezuela is suspect given the downscaling of diplomacy and development assets at the US State Department, the dissolution of USAID, and the reorientation of the Department of Defense for “Great Power Competition.”

The Trump administration has framed its actions against Venezuela as a law enforcement operation against drug trafficking, based on a previous 2020 indictment of Maduro, rather than a military operation. In the lead up to the attack, the Trump administration pointed also at times a desire to restore access to oil assets that were first nationalized in the 1970s with foreign assets, which were further seized in the early 2000’s under Maduro’s predecessor and mentor, Hugo Chávez.

The more Washington uses this attack as a pretext for securing access to oil, the more this will play into claims that the United States is acting in a manner that violates international law and norms against territorial conquest—norms already under tremendous strain given Russian’s invasion of Ukraine.

The rest of the Maduro regime was apparently left in place in Venezuela, and it is not clear the Trump administration has plans to go any further. Trump’s press conference today suggested the United States would run the country for the time being with some unidentified Venezuelans, possibly from the current government, and with an eye toward restoring stability and access to oil. This raises profound questions about whether further US troops will be deployed. Maduro had remained in power through electoral fraud, most recently in 2024 in an election that was regarded as stolen. So, the question remains, what happens to the Venezuelan government now?

#### That’s Russia’s goal---and they’ll invest covert military assistance to further it. BUT it risks escalation to war with Russia through direct conflict with tripwire forces.

Cohen et al. 23 [Raphael S. Cohen, director of the Strategy and Doctrine Program of RAND Project AIR FORCE, director of the National Security Program at the RAND School of Public Policy, professor of policy analysis at the RAND School, and senior political scientist at RAND, formerly held research fellowships at the Brookings Institution, the American Enterprise Institute, and the National Defense University’s Center for Complex Operations, former staffer on the 2018 National Defense Strategy Commission and deputy executive director of the 2023 National Defense Strategy Commission, PhD government, Georgetown University, MA security studies, Georgetown University, MA strategic studies, U.S. Army War College; Irina A. **Chindea**, Senior Political Scientist and professor of policy analysis; Christian **Curriden**, defense analyst; Kristen **Gunness**, Associate Research Department Director in the Defense and Political Sciences Department, Senior Policy Researcher, and Professor of Policy Analysis; Khrystyna **Holynska**, Policy Researcher; Marta **Kepe**, Senior Defense Analyst; Kurt **Klein**, assistant policy researcher; Ashley L. **Rhoades**, defense policy researcher; and Nathan **Vest**, research assistant; all at RAND; “Great-Power Competition and Conflict in the 21st Century Outside the Indo-Pacific and Europe,” RAND Research Report, 4-25-2023, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\_reports/RRA900/RRA969-1/RAND\_RRA969-1.pdf]

Potential Conflicts in Latin America

As is the case in the other theaters, some of the Latin American states that figure prominently in the competition narrative, such as Brazil, are relatively stable (see Figure 3.3), and the mere degree of great-power involvement and the resulting potential for competition are not sufficient to indicate where future great-power conflicts might occur.

In contrast with the other two theaters, however, some of the more plausible conflict scenarios we examined in Latin America exhibit some features that potentially make them more likely to result in direct conflict between great powers. First, unlike in the Africa and Middle East scenarios, the potential triggers for intervention do not revolve around the threat of Islamic terrorism, where the United States, China, and Russia at least theoretically find common cause. Rather, the triggers in the Latin America scenarios focus on instability in authoritarian regimes with pro-democracy movements, where the United States and the other two powers would potentially back opposing sides. Second, more so than in the other theaters, events in Latin America affect the U.S. homeland—be it through immigration flows, drug-trafficking, and even potentially terrorism. Although U.S. decisionmakers deem the theater secondary in some senses, its geographic proximity to the United States means that Washington must be concerned that China and Russia could attempt to use the theater as leverage, if only to reduce U.S. presence in their own respective parts of the world. These dynamics are manifest in the cases examined here—the combined Venezuela and Colombia scenario and the Nicaragua scenario.

Venezuela and Colombia

Venezuela and Colombia are among the more plausible locations for a proxy or limited war in Latin America. Venezuela—under Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro—has developed warm relations with both China and Russia, while Colombia is one of the longest-established democracies and a long-standing U.S. security partner in the region. The region has been mired in internal conflict for decades, fueled by left- and right-wing insurgent groups and drug-trafficking. During the Cold War, as well as in the decades after its end, the United States supported the Colombian government as it battled left-wing guerrilla groups, including the Soviet- and Cuban-backed Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). And although the Cold War may be long over, turmoil in Venezuela and the legacy of internal conflicts in Colombia may mean that this region could once again erupt into conflict with the involvement of external powers.

How Might a Conflict Erupt?

One potential scenario in Venezuela and one in Colombia, based on the most-salient sources of conflict, might lead to a renewed proxy war. The two cases are distinct but interdependent because of possible mutual interferences and conflict spillover across the border. Of the two, in our assessment, the scenario centered on Venezuela would more plausibly draw in rival great powers. It would produce a proxy conflict reminiscent of the Cold War, with the United

[FIGURE OMITTED]

States supporting a pro-democracy movement and Russia and China backing a notionally left-leaning regime. Since Maduro became president after Chávez’s death in 2013, Venezuela has been plagued by opposition protests that the security forces and local civilian militia groups loyal to the regime (known as colectivos) violently suppressed.180 The 50-percent collapse in oil prices and its corresponding toll on Venezuela’s oil-centric economy only further fueled unrest. Maduro’s domestic policies exacerbated the instability. He asserted “military control over the economy” and “cracked down on the opposition, media, and civil society; engaged in drug trafficking and corruption; convened fraudulent elections, and impeded humanitarian aid distribution.”181 As a result, some 96 percent of Venezuelans lived in poverty by 2019.182

Against this volatile background, Venezuela plunged into a political crisis after Maduro was re-elected in May 2018 in an election marred by widespread allegations of fraud. As a result, some 60 countries, including the United States, recognized Juan Guaidó, the president of Venezuela’s National Assembly and leader of the opposition, as the legitimate interim president. Guaidó offered to serve as interim president of Venezuela until new elections were held and “took the oath of office on January 23, 2019.”183 Maduro’s party responded by taking de facto control of the National Assembly, leading to an ongoing standoff. Internal violence could plausibly be triggered for the foreseeable future, and the military and security forces would side with Maduro’s government.184

A second scenario, focused on Colombia, is somewhat less likely to draw great-power involvement. The FARC and the Colombian government signed a peace treaty ending the decades-long conflict in September 2016, but there are multiple factors that could reignite internal violence in the country.185 Colombia is still struggling to integrate former FARC members into society.186 Moreover, some FARC guerrillas took up arms again, driven by the sense that the Colombian government did not keep its side of the bargain negotiated during the peace process.187 Similarly, although Colombia’s major right-wing paramilitary group, the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, demobilized in 2006, its place was taken by the so called BACRIMs (which stands for bandas criminales, or criminal bands in English),188 which still exist today.189 Additionally, although the Cali and Medellín cartels were dismantled in the mid-1990s, the two organizations were succeeded by smaller and less-powerful criminal groups referred to as cartelitos (or small cartels) that fought for control over Colombia’s drug trade.190 Finally, Colombia also experienced widespread protests and violent clashes with the Colombian National Police in spring 2021, stemming from an economic downturn exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and an unpopular tax bill.191 Ultimately, some combination of disgruntled former guerrillas, popular economic unrest, and the still-present drug trade could lead to a return to large-scale instability in Colombia.

Importantly, the causes of conflict could originate in either Venezuela or Colombia, but a conflict in one will have impacts on the other. Under Chávez, Venezuela provided financial assistance and safe haven to the FARC guerrillas.192 By some estimates, there were 75 FARC encampments hosting 1,500 fighters in Venezuela by 2008.193 The Maduro administration continued this support, which was also extended to insurgents from the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional).194 According to the U.S. State Department, Venezuela has provided “a permissive environment for known terrorist groups, including dissidents of [FARC], the Colombian-origin National Liberation Army (ELN), and Hizballah sympathizers.”195

Colombia has been involved in turmoil in Venezuela as well. Approximately 1.72 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants had fled into Colombia by the end of December 2020, and the United States used Colombia as its staging location for its response to the crisis.196 U.S. leaders, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, met Guaidó in the country.197 And Colombia was a staging ground for a failed plot by a group of mercenaries led by a former U.S. soldier to overthrow the Maduro regime.198

In short, no matter how the conflict starts, broader regional—and, as we explore in the next section, potentially global—implications are almost assured.

Why Would the United States, China, and Russia Get Involved, and Whom Might Each Support?

The United States has more at stake in any kind of conflict in Colombia or Venezuela than do its strategic competitors. Colombia is the United States’ most important security partner in South America. Plan Colombia, launched in 2000, is the flagship U.S. counter-narcotics initiative and is credited with “transition[ing Colombia] from being an aid recipient to a strategic ally of the United States and an exporter of security and political leadership in the region.”199 Although Colombia’s share of total U.S. global trade and investment is not significant,200 the United States is Colombia’s largest trade and investment partner.201 And Colombia is an important diplomatic partner of the United States, supporting U.S. efforts pertaining to North Korea, Syria, Iran, Ukraine, and elsewhere.202 For all these reasons, the United States will likely back the Colombian government in the event of conflict.

By contrast, Venezuela is a headache for U.S. foreign policy. Although the United States was a major consumer of Venezuelan energy (the United States was Venezuela’s largest trading partner prior to it suspending diplomatic relations in March 2019), the Chávez and Maduro governments became overtly hostile to the United States.203 Meanwhile, Venezuela pursued closer relations with China, Russia, and Iran, raising U.S. concerns that Venezuela could be used as a base for Russian, Chinese, or even Iranian power projection in the immediate vicinity of the United States.204 Thus, apart from concerns about Maduro’s humanitarian and democratic values, the United States also has strategic reasons to prefer that Maduro (or one of his regime cronies) is not running Venezuela.

By contrast, the Chávez and Maduro regimes have been good for China. Venezuela’s rapprochement to China started soon after Chávez assumed the presidency in 1999. From China’s perspective, Venezuela provided minerals, energy resources, and agricultural products for China’s economy and a market for Chinese companies.205 Its hardline anti-U.S. policies also served China’s overarching political objective of making Latin America less dependent on the United States.206 Although Venezuela’s economic downturn and the corruption and mismanagement by the Maduro regime have diminished the profitability of China’s investments in the country, China still retains a substantial economic stake there and remains committed to the Maduro regime, if only to prevent a more pro-U.S. government from coming to power. 207 By 2020, Venezuela was the “largest recipient in South America of Chinese official finance, [and] Venezuela has accepted more than $60 billion in loans from the China Development Bank (CDB) since 2007 in exchange for future oil shipments.”208

China has less at stake in Colombia, at least for the time being. Given that Colombia remains a close U.S. partner, there is not the same strategic alignment that China has with Venezuela. China does have a budding economic relationship with Colombia: The number of Chinese companies in the country has increased from 20 in 2016 to approximately 80 in 2020, making China Colombia’s second-largest trading partner after the United States.209 And as of March 2021, China and Colombia were negotiating a free trade agreement.210

Finally, Russia’s interests mirror those of China, to some extent. Venezuela-Russia ties have warmed since 2000, and even more so since 2014.211 Like China, Russia has economic interests in Venezuela as a fellow oil producer, and Venezuela has bought Russian arms.212 Although the economic downturn means that Russia is facing economic losses there, continuing support for Venezuela may be Russia’s best bet to recoup its investments.213 More importantly, Russia seeks influence in Venezuela for leverage in the United States’ backyard, in response to what Russia sees as U.S. threats against Russia’s central interests in its near abroad. And Venezuela is important as a supporter of Russian foreign policy: It was one of only 11 countries that voted against UN resolutions condemning Russia for annexing Crimea,214 and it was one of two countries in the region to support the Russian view in recognizing the breakaway regions of Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) as independent states.215 Venezuela has facilitated Russia’s quest to project military power close to the United States—for example, by hosting Russian naval and air deployments.216 Russia views U.S. pressure on the Maduro regime as a risk of yet another U.S.-sponsored regime change, which Russia views as a threat and generally seeks to thwart.217 Thus, in 2019, to support Maduro, Moscow supplied Venezuela with S-300 systems, which came with Russian military “experts,” who could also provide security for Maduro.218 Russia has also supported Maduro’s regime diplomatically at the UN, as well as with financial aid.219

Russia has less at stake in Colombia. Russia views Colombia as a long-term partner of the United States and as hostile to its interests and has acted accordingly. Russian criminal organizations allegedly had ties to weapon shipments to the FARC and other left-wing groups in exchange for cocaine.220 Russian aircraft have breached Colombian airspace several times, perhaps as a signal that Russia intends to support its Venezuelan and Nicaraguan clients— both of whom have border disputes with Colombia—against a potential Colombian military intervention.221 Russia was also allegedly behind a cyberattack on the Colombian voter registration system in 2018.222

The central dynamic that distinguishes these cases from the potential conflict scenarios that we considered in Africa and the Middle East is that the United States, China, and Russia have opposing preferences in Venezuela and Colombia. The United States backs the Colombian government, but it would prefer someone other than the Maduro regime (or one of the regime’s cronies) at the helm of Venezuela. By contrast, China and Russia would back the Maduro regime and would prefer a regime in Colombia that is more pliable (from their perspective) and less supportive of the United States. What makes this situation particularly dangerous is not just that the powers’ interests are opposed but the fact that, at least in Venezuela, both the United States and Russia have shown that they would commit military resources on behalf of their preferred outcome.

How Might a Conflict Unfold?

Of the two potential sources of conflict in this scenario, the one in Venezuela might be more foreseeable—because a preview of incipient proxy conflict occurred when the Maduro regime faced acute pressure in 2019. In response, Russia—which had already been backing the regime with military equipment and aid—sent 100 troops, believed to focus largely on assisting the regime with cyber expertise, ostensibly to “help shield Maduro from ‘regime change’ and ensure a foothold for Moscow in Latin America.”223 For its part, the United States condemned Russia’s deployment to Venezuela, although the U.S. military later ramped up its own naval and air presence in the Caribbean to counter drug-smuggling and corrupt actors, such as the Maduro regime.224 Finally, although it did not send troops of its own, China supported Russia’s move diplomatically.225

In the event that the Maduro or a similarly aligned regime faced a more significant threat to its survival, the three powers would opt for similar, or even more robust, responses (see Table 3.8). In Russia’s case, there is a limit to how significant of a military presence it could deploy to Venezuela in a crisis before it faced logistical challenges. Although Russia has flown its nuclear bombers to the region as a show of force, a 2020 RAND analysis of Russian sustainment capabilities concluded that any significant deployment of Russian troops to the Western Hemisphere—including to Venezuela—would place a significant burden on Russian air- and sealift.226 Still, Russia maintains the ability to send PMSCs to support the regime, modest numbers of special forces, and military equipment and aid.

[TABLE OMITTED]

China could also ramp up its support to the Venezuelan regime—diplomatically, economically, and potentially even militarily in supplying military equipment. Deploying forces to Venezuela would be more challenging. Without much in the way of military presence in the Western Hemisphere, China would have to project power halfway around the world, which requires time—especially if Chinese military aircraft could not get permission to fly over countries friendly to the United States and Chinese military ships could not transit through the Panama Canal. This does not necessarily forestall direct Chinese military intervention, but the logistical hurdles may diminish its likelihood.

By contrast, the United States would have a full suite of options—from aid on the low end to full-scale overt military intervention on the high end—to support the opposition. At the same time, a robust military intervention threatens to be protracted and costly (both financially and in terms of political capital) for the United States.227

Great-power intervention in a conflict in Colombia presents more of a speculative scenario (see Table 3.9). Aside from the fact that the United States would be backing the government and Russia the opposition in this scenario (with China likely to sit out the conflict in the initial stages), the willingness of the powers to get involved might be somewhat different from the situation in the Venezuela scenario. Given that the United States would be coming to the aid of a sovereign government and presumably would be welcomed into the country, the United States deploying forces overtly to support Colombia is somewhat more likely than in the Venezuela scenario.

By contrast, Russia and China would face greater challenges using military force or rendering substantial indirect support to a non-state actor overtly. They would face similar logistical constraints as in the Venezuela scenario (although China would benefit from the fact that Colombia—unlike Venezuela—has a coast on the Pacific Ocean) but would also be opposed by a state actor and, perhaps, the United States. Although both Russia and China could conceivably take some kind of show-of-force actions (e.g., naval presence), anything more would be difficult for either power to sustain. In this scenario, it is more likely that, were one or both competitors to support the opposition, they would do so covertly, seeking to bog down Colombia—and, by extension, the United States—in a protracted conflict.228 Whom China might choose to support, however, is less than obvious. If Sino-U.S. competition intensifies significantly, China might support non-state proxies. But this would represent a break with China’s tendency to support standing governments. Thus, China might also initially attempt to wait in the wings for the conflict to play out—and might even ultimately back the government in Bogotá, which is better positioned to advance China’s longer-term interests in the country.

Whether a conflict were to begin in Venezuela or Colombia, once the United States made the decision to intervene, it might end up in a drawn-out conflict in the region.229 Unlike in the scenarios examined in Africa and the Middle East, there is little common ground among the three powers here, and Russia has already shown a willingness to commit resources on the side opposing the United States, increasing the chances of escalation.

#### Effective diplomacy’s key to disempower hardline military factions and expel tripwires. Incompetence creates openings for Russia to double down on arming the opposition.

Fonseca & Brown 26 [Brian Fonseca, Director of Florida International University’s Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy, International Security Fellow at New America; and Martin **Brown**, research coordinator at JGI, MA candidate in global affairs, FIU’s Green School; “Washington’s Path to Displacing Rivals in Post-Maduro Venezuela,” Americas Quarterly, 1-13-2026, https://americasquarterly.org/article/washingtons-path-to-displacing-rivals-in-post-maduro-venezuela/]

The removal of Nicolás Maduro marks a pivotal inflection point in U.S. foreign policy toward the Western Hemisphere. As articulated in the latest U.S. National Security Strategy [NSS], Washington is emphasizing the region as a core theater of competition, denying its extra-hemispheric rivals the ability to entrench economic, military, or political influence, and treating these issues as a matter directly tied to homeland security.

For nearly a quarter century, Venezuela served as a test case for how extra-hemispheric powers could exploit declining U.S. engagement to expand their footprint in the Americas. China, Russia, and Iran each employed distinct instruments—financial leverage, security cooperation, and ideological alignment—to entrench themselves in Venezuela’s political economy and project influence near U.S. borders. With Washington now engaging an interim authority led by Delcy Rodríguez, the U.S. faces the more difficult task of converting renewed hemispheric assertiveness into a durable realignment without causing prolonged instability.

Venezuela’s strategic importance makes this test unavoidable. It has the world’s largest oil reserves, emerging critical-mineral potential, and a legacy role as a platform for anti-U.S. influence in the region. Displacing extra-hemispheric rivals from this space has become central to Washington’s hemispheric strategy. Whether that objective can be achieved will depend less on dramatic gestures than on sequencing, incentives, and the careful reconstruction of economic and institutional foundations consistent with a strategy of denial rather than domination.

China: Financial leverage and oil capture

Among Venezuela’s external partners, China has been the most economically consequential. Since the early 2000s, Beijing extended more than $100 billion in credit to Caracas, largely through oil-backed lending tied to long-term energy supply. These arrangements bound Venezuelan production to Chinese repayment terms and embedded Chinese firms deeply in the country’s energy infrastructure.

This financial leverage translated into strategic access. Through joint ventures in the Orinoco Belt and long-term supply agreements, China secured preferential access to some of the world’s largest heavy crude reserves. Beijing’s approach was pragmatic rather than ideological; it focused on building infrastructure, technology transfer, and resource-backed finance to guarantee supply and hedge against instability in the Middle East. By the final years of Hugo Chávez’s rule, Venezuela had become a key node in China’s global energy diversification strategy.

Russia: Strategic signaling without economic rescue

Russia’s relationship with Venezuela has been defined less by economic depth than by military cooperation and strategic signaling toward Washington. Since the mid-2000s, Moscow has extended more than $20 billion in loans and credit facilities, primarily tied to arms sales and defense cooperation.

Following Chávez’s death, Russia preserved its military footprint but declined to provide meaningful economic relief as Venezuela’s economy collapsed. Between 2012 and 2020, GDP contracted by more than two-thirds, while hyperinflation peaked in 2018. Moscow’s engagement under Maduro focused on protecting sunk costs rather than underwriting recovery.

Russia maintained stakes in several oil projects and reinforced defense ties through arms transfers and military-industrial cooperation, but trade volumes remained modest, and no major new loans were forthcoming after 2018. Russia’s own fiscal constraints, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, limited its ability to sustain Venezuela as anything more than a symbolic outpost.

Iran: Ideological alignment and sanctions evasion

Iran’s role in Venezuela has been narrower but symbolically potent. Bound by shared opposition to U.S. power, Tehran and Caracas cooperated on sanctions evasion, fuel swaps, logistics networks, and the use of shadow tanker fleets. Iran also supplied limited military technologies and technical assistance.

While Tehran lacks China’s financial scale or Russia’s military reach, its engagement amplified anti-U.S. narratives and demonstrated how sanctioned states can collaborate to blunt Western pressure. In doing so, Iran reinforced Venezuela’s function as part of a broader network of resistance to U.S.-led economic and political systems.

A managed recalibration

Displacing U.S. rivals from Venezuela will require sustained engagement—not only toward external partners but also toward regime-linked elites. Any U.S. effort will take place in the context of a regime that remains fragmented, coercive, and deeply criminalized; Venezuela’s post-Maduro transition is not occurring on a clean institutional slate.

Instead, it faces a system shaped by intra-elite rivalries, autonomous military interests, and entrenched patronage networks tied to oil, gold, narcotics, and informal coercive actors. Power struggles within this system will condition the pace and direction of any foreign policy recalibration.

These dynamics will complicate Washington’s ability to force extra-hemispheric actors out of Venezuela. So, Washington will likely rely on a calibrated mix of targeted sanctions, conditional sanctions relief, asset freezes, and international legal exposure to incentivize cooperation while deterring efforts to preserve Venezuela’s legacy arrangements with rival powers. This process is unlikely to take the form of dramatic expulsions or abrupt ruptures. More plausibly, it will unfold as a managed recalibration.

Economically, realignment will center on renegotiation rather than seizure. A post-Maduro government could seek to restructure sovereign debt, revise oil-backed repayment agreements, and re-bid energy and infrastructure contracts under new regulatory frameworks. Forced sales or asset seizures remain possible, but they would invite prolonged arbitration, capital flight, and reduced access to financing. Gradual recalibration, especially with China, offers a more viable path, preserving energy production while reducing strategic dependence.

Diplomatically, mass expulsions would impose reputational costs and risk escalation at precisely the moment when debt restructuring and energy normalization are most critical. Instead, Washington will press Caracas to downgrade relations, narrow diplomatic access, and recalibrate formal engagements in ways that limit influence without provoking open confrontation.

In the security and intelligence domains, foreign military and security footprints will likely be constrained more quickly, through access limitations, contract terminations, and the winding down of advisory roles. Intelligence cooperation, including with Cuba, is likely to be curtailed decisively.

Realignment over rupture

China, Russia, and Iran will not be passive actors. They “get a vote,” and their responses will shape the pace and character of any transition. Thus far, all three have emphasized sovereignty, contractual obligation, and non-interference, signaling that resistance will be pursued primarily through legal, economic, and diplomatic channels rather than force. None is likely to withdraw quietly, but neither are they well positioned to impose decisive countermeasures if a post-Maduro government prioritizes economic recovery and institutional normalization.

While Russian and Iranian influence may be comparatively easier to displace, China poses a more formidable challenge given the scale and depth of its investments.

If Washington moves decisively to unwind sanctions, ease its economic blockade, and engage meaningfully with Venezuela, it will have a credible opportunity to reset bilateral relations and marginalize extra-hemispheric actors. For this strategy to succeed, Rodríguez must demonstrate to internal regime rivals that rapprochement with the U.S. delivers tangible economic and political dividends. Conversely, prolonged hesitation would weaken her standing and create openings for internal and external actors opposed to the new arrangement. Ultimately, success will depend on Washington’s ability to move quickly and align the survival interests of transitional elites with economic recovery.

#### They’ve already threatened to deploy dual-capable missiles. U.S. over-reliance on military force causes follow-through, which goes nuclear.

Pike 25 [John Pike, Director of GlobalSecurity.org, previously worked for nearly two decades with the Federation of American Scientists, where he directed the Space Policy, Cyberstrategy, Military Analysis, Nuclear Resource and Intelligence Resource projects, member of the Council on Foreign Relations, and served on a variety of non-governmental boards and advisory committees, including the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, the Peace Research and European Security Studies Center, and the Verification Technology Information Centre of London, “Oreshnik Missiles to Venezuela,” Global Security, 11-9-2025, https://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/world/venezuela/oreshnik.htm]

Oreshnik Missiles to Venezuela

In early November 2025, senior Russian officials indicated Moscow's willingness to supply Venezuela with advanced missile systems, including the newly operational Oreshnik hypersonic ballistic missile and Kalibr cruise missiles. This development emerged amid escalating tensions between the United States and Venezuela, with Washington deploying substantial naval forces to the Caribbean region ostensibly for counternarcotics operations. The potential weapons transfer has prompted comparisons to the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, though military analysts suggest significant logistical and strategic constraints may limit the scope of any actual deployment.

The phrase "Missiles of October" references the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, a 13-day standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union that brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. It began when U.S. intelligence discovered Soviet medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles [IRBM] being deployed in Cuba, just 90 miles from Florida. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev had authorized the placement as a response to U.S. Jupiter missiles in Turkey and Italy, as well as perceived threats from American military exercises and the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. President John F. Kennedy imposed a naval blockade (termed a "quarantine") around Cuba to prevent further shipments, leading to tense negotiations.

The crisis ended when the Soviets agreed to remove the missiles in exchange for a U.S. pledge not to invade Cuba and a secret deal to withdraw U.S. missiles from Turkey. It highlighted the dangers of nuclear brinkmanship during the Cold War and led to improved U.S.-Soviet communication, including the establishment of the Moscow-Washington hotline.

The "Missiles of November" is an analogous reference to escalating tensions in Venezuela during November 2025, where Russia had reportedly deployed advanced missiles and military hardware amid fears of U.S. intervention. This situation echoed the 1962 crisis, with Russia positioning weapons in a Latin American ally close to U.S. shores as a counter to perceived American aggression—potentially linked to U.S. support for Ukraine, sanctions on Russia, or threats against Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro's regime.

Multiple Russian cargo planes, including an Ilyushin Il-76 linked to military operations, had landed in Caracas, delivering heavy cargo such as munitions, missiles (including hypersonic Oreshnik systems), drones, radar components, and air-to-air missiles. Venezuelan officials requested urgent expansions of military cooperation from Russia and China, including radars, missiles, and drones with ranges up to 1,000 km. Russia also pledged to restore Venezuela's Su-30MK2 fighter jets and provide 14 missile defense systems.

Maduro's forces deployed air defenses like the Buk-M2E system, training cadets with FPV drone simulators, and positioning troops on beaches in anticipation of a potential U.S. invasion. Anti-ship missiles like the Bastion system, previously supplied by Russia, are part of Venezuela's coastal defenses.

U.S. warships, including the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford, have approached Venezuelan waters. Reports indicate the Pentagon is considering air strikes on Venezuelan ports and airports tied to drug trafficking, though incoming U.S. leadership (under President-elect Trump) has verbally ruled out strikes but left operational details vague. Russia stated readiness to assist Venezuela against any U.S. actions, with some Russian lawmakers suggesting arming Venezuela with nuclear-capable missiles as a deterrent.

Commentators describe this as a "Cuban Missile Crisis 2.0" or a "silent riposte" to NATO expansions. Russia's moves, potentially placing hypersonic weapons (capable of evading U.S. defenses) within striking distance of Florida, were seen as a direct response to U.S. plans to deploy long-range Tomahawk cruise missiles in Europe. Unlike 1962, modern hypersonics like Oreshnik and Kalibr add complexity, potentially shortening response times and escalating risks. Venezuela's proximity to the U.S. (closer than Cuba in some aspects) amplifies the stakes, with calls for Maduro to hold new elections amid U.S. pressure.

This situation remains fluid, and underscored ongoing great-power rivalries in the Western Hemisphere.

Russian Statements and Diplomatic Context

Alexei Zhuravlyov, First Deputy Chairman of the State Duma Defense Committee, told the Russian news outlet Gazeta.ru on November 1, 2025, that Russia sees no obstacles to providing Venezuela with advanced missile systems.[1] Zhuravlyov characterized Russia as one of Venezuela's key military-technical partners, noting that Moscow already supplies Caracas with nearly the complete range of weaponry, from small arms to aviation equipment. He emphasized that details regarding the volume and specific systems being delivered remain classified, suggesting that American military planners might face unexpected developments in the region.

The Russian official's comments appear to have been prompted by a direct appeal from Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro to Russian President Vladimir Putin, as well as to leaders in China and Iran, requesting military assistance to strengthen Venezuela's defense capabilities.[2] According to reporting based on leaked internal U.S. documents, Maduro specifically requested help with radar systems, aircraft repairs, and possibly missiles to counter the increased American military presence in the Caribbean. The Venezuelan president reportedly characterized Russian-supplied Sukhoi Su-30MK2 fighter aircraft as the most important deterrent available to his government when facing potential military threats.

This diplomatic outreach occurred against the backdrop of a newly ratified strategic partnership treaty between Russia and Venezuela. Putin signed the agreement in October 2025, formalizing cooperation across military, economic, and energy sectors.[3] The treaty appears to provide a legal framework for expanded defense cooperation, including large-scale projects such as a munitions factory that opened in Venezuela's Aragua state in July 2025 after nearly two decades of planning. Additionally, Moscow has secured exploration rights for natural gas and oil deposits valued at billions of dollars, further deepening its economic stake in Venezuela.

United States Military Buildup in the Caribbean

The Russian statements on potential weapons transfers came in response to a significant American naval deployment to the Caribbean region. The Trump administration dispatched the USS Gerald R. Ford carrier strike group, along with at least eight U.S. Navy warships and a submarine, to waters near Venezuela.[4] By early November 2025, the Ford and its escort, the Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer USS Bainbridge, had passed through the Strait of Gibraltar and were proceeding westward across the Atlantic toward the Caribbean.

The White House characterized this military buildup as part of counternarcotics operations targeting drug trafficking networks allegedly controlled by the Maduro regime. In August 2025, the U.S. government formally accused Maduro of leading the Cartel de los Soles, a major narcotics-trafficking organization that reportedly collaborates with the Venezuela-based Tren de Aragua gang, Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel, and other international criminal networks. U.S. officials identified specific targets inside Venezuela tied to these drug trafficking operations, though the administration maintained that military action remained unlikely.

President Trump, in an interview with 60 Minutes, downplayed the prospect of armed conflict with Venezuela while criticizing the Maduro government for its role in drug trafficking and migration issues. Secretary of State Marco Rubio similarly suggested that Maduro's tenure as Venezuela's leader might be approaching its conclusion, though both officials emphasized diplomatic and economic pressure rather than military intervention. Despite these assurances, the scale of the U.S. naval presence represents one of the most substantial American military deployments to the Caribbean in recent years.

The Oreshnik Missile System

The Oreshnik represents Russia's most recent entry into the category of intermediate-range ballistic missiles, though considerable uncertainty surrounds its actual capabilities and operational status. Western and Ukrainian intelligence assessments suggest the system may be derived from or related to the RS-26 Rubezh intercontinental ballistic missile program, with the Oreshnik potentially representing a road-mobile, intermediate-range variant.[5] Russian officials claim the missile can achieve speeds approaching Mach 10 and strike targets at ranges up to approximately 5,500 kilometers, though independent verification of these performance specifications remains limited.

The missile first came to international attention in November 2024 when Russia conducted what appears to have been a combat test strike against the Ukrainian city of Dnipro. President Putin characterized this attack as retaliation for Ukraine's use of Western-supplied long-range weapons, including American ATACMS missiles and British Storm Shadow cruise missiles, to strike targets inside Russian territory. Following this initial use, Washington classified the Oreshnik as an intermediate-range ballistic missile system, a designation that carries significant implications under international arms control frameworks.

Russian sources describe the Oreshnik as capable of carrying multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles, though the exact payload configuration remains unclear. The system reportedly can be fitted with either conventional or nuclear warheads, giving it potential utility across a range of strategic scenarios. Putin has characterized the missile as a weapon that ensures parity and strategic balance, emphasizing its extended range and hypersonic velocity as key advantages that make interception extremely difficult with current defense technologies.

The production status of the Oreshnik presents a major question mark in any discussion of potential transfers to Venezuela. In August and October 2025, Putin announced that the missile had entered serial production and would be deployed to Russian combat formations, with initial deployment to Belarus also planned.[6] However, the actual number of operational systems remains unknown, and the missile appears to be in very limited supply. Given Russia's ongoing need for precision strike capabilities in Ukraine, where the conflict has consumed substantial quantities of advanced munitions, Moscow may have few Oreshnik missiles available for export even if political will existed to transfer them.

Kalibr Cruise Missile Considerations

The Kalibr cruise missile family presents a somewhat different calculus than the Oreshnik for potential Venezuelan deployment. Russia has employed Kalibr missiles extensively since the beginning of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, launching these weapons from both surface vessels and submarines against a wide range of targets. The missiles have demonstrated considerable accuracy and have been used to strike both military installations and civilian infrastructure throughout Ukraine, including a particularly deadly attack on the city of Vinnytsia in July 2022 that killed more than 20 civilians.[7]

Western intelligence assessments suggest Kalibr variants possess ranges between approximately 930 and 1,550 miles, depending on the specific model and payload configuration. From launch positions in Venezuela, these ranges would potentially place portions of the southern United States and numerous facilities throughout the Caribbean within strike range. The containerized Club-K export variant of the Kalibr system presents particular concerns for defense planners, as these launchers can be concealed within standard shipping containers and transported relatively discreetly by sea or air.

The intensive use of Kalibr missiles in Ukraine over nearly four years of sustained combat operations raises questions about Russia's remaining inventory of these systems. International sanctions have affected Russia's ability to produce advanced standoff weapons, as the missiles require sophisticated guidance systems, specialized materials, and precision manufacturing capabilities that may be constrained by export controls on critical components. The rate at which Russian industry can manufacture replacement Kalibr missiles remains uncertain, but military analysts generally assess that these standoff weapons have become considerably more precious to Russian military planners than they were before the Ukraine conflict.

Despite these inventory concerns, Russia has successfully maintained Kalibr production throughout the conflict period, and Zhuravlyov's description of the system as "well-proven" suggests Moscow may view these cruise missiles as more expendable than cutting-edge systems like the Oreshnik. The existence of export variants designed specifically for foreign customers also indicates Russia has historically been more willing to transfer Kalibr technology to allied nations than to share its most advanced strategic systems.

Recent Russian Arms Deliveries to Venezuela

Concurrent with statements about potential future weapons transfers, Russian officials confirmed recent deliveries of air defense systems to Venezuela. Zhuravlyov disclosed that Russian Il-76 transport aircraft had recently delivered Pantsir-S1 and Buk-M2E air defense systems to Caracas.[8] These systems add to Venezuela's existing air defense architecture, which already includes S-300VM (Antey-2500) long-range systems, Buk-M2E medium-range batteries, and Pantsir-S1 short-range point defense units.

The Russian-Venezuelan defense relationship extends back more than two decades, with Venezuela having purchased 24 Su-30MK2 multirole fighter aircraft beginning in 2006. Subsequent deliveries established a layered air defense network anchored by the S-300VM systems, which independent tracking sources indicate arrived around 2012-2013. Buk-M2E deliveries occurred during the 2013-2015 period according to open-source reporting and industry sources. While maintenance of this inventory has been inconsistent over the years, recent Il-76 flights to Caracas suggest renewed Russian attention to sustaining Venezuela's defense capabilities through logistics support and training programs.

This established pattern of military-technical cooperation provides context for Russian claims about potential Oreshnik and Kalibr transfers. Moscow has demonstrated both the political will and logistical capability to deliver sophisticated weapons systems to Venezuela over extended periods, even as the country faced international pressure and economic sanctions. The question is not whether Russia could theoretically deliver advanced missiles to Venezuela, but rather whether such transfers align with Russian strategic interests and whether Moscow possesses sufficient quantities of these weapons to spare for export.

Legal and Arms Control Implications

Any transfer of Oreshnik missiles to Venezuela would raise significant questions under international arms control frameworks, particularly the Missile Technology Control Regime. The MTCR represents an informal arrangement among partner nations to restrict exports of missile systems capable of delivering at least a 500-kilogram payload to ranges of at least 300 kilometers.[9] The Oreshnik clearly exceeds these thresholds by substantial margins, falling squarely into Category I restrictions that call for the strongest presumption of denial for export applications.

Russia participates in the MTCR as a partner nation, though the regime functions through voluntary adherence rather than binding treaty obligations. Moscow has previously demonstrated willingness to interpret MTCR guidelines flexibly when such interpretations serve Russian strategic interests, and Russian officials have consistently maintained that sovereign nations retain the ultimate authority to make their own export decisions. In the context of Venezuela, Russia would likely argue that any weapons transfers represent legitimate defense cooperation between sovereign states responding to perceived American aggression in the region.

For long-range variants of the Kalibr cruise missile, the legal situation becomes more ambiguous. While some Kalibr models would clearly trigger MTCR restrictions, Russia has developed export variants with deliberately limited ranges designed to remain below Category I thresholds. Moscow could potentially argue that transfer of these constrained-range versions respects the letter of MTCR commitments while still providing Venezuela with meaningful standoff strike capabilities. Such arguments would likely prove unconvincing to the United States and other Western nations, but they would provide Russia with a diplomatic position from which to defend the transfers.

Beyond the MTCR, broader questions of regional stability and the potential for arms racing in Latin America arise from any significant Russian weapons transfers to Venezuela. The deployment of advanced ballistic missiles to the Western Hemisphere would represent a substantial shift in the regional security environment, potentially prompting responses from the United States and other nations concerned about the implications for their own security. The historical precedent of the Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrates how sensitive Washington remains to the presence of Soviet or Russian strategic weapons in the Caribbean basin.

Logistical Challenges and Technical Feasibility

Military analysts have identified substantial logistical obstacles to any significant deployment of Oreshnik systems to Venezuela. The combined weight of an Oreshnik missile and its mobile launcher is estimated at approximately 70 tons, requiring heavy-lift transport aircraft for intercontinental movement.[10] Russia's Antonov An-124 Ruslan cargo aircraft represent the most capable platform for such missions, but these aircraft operate in limited numbers and face significant demands supporting Russian military operations across multiple theaters.

A minimal deployment of even a single Oreshnik system with supporting equipment would require multiple An-124 flights carrying the missile, launcher, command and control equipment, maintenance facilities, and spare parts. A more operationally meaningful deployment of several launchers with adequate missile stocks would demand a sustained airlift effort that would almost certainly be detected by American and allied intelligence assets monitoring transatlantic air traffic. Satellite imagery, signals intelligence, and human intelligence sources would likely provide advance warning of such movements, allowing the United States to respond diplomatically or militarily before systems became operational.

For Kalibr missiles, particularly containerized variants, the logistical picture differs considerably. Club-K systems designed for export can be transported by conventional cargo aircraft or aboard surface vessels, making discrete deployment more feasible. Russia has demonstrated the ability to move weapons systems to Venezuela by sea, with cargo vessels making regular runs between Russian ports and Venezuelan harbors. The containerized nature of some Kalibr variants would allow them to blend with legitimate commercial cargo, though intelligence agencies would likely maintain close surveillance of suspicious shipments.

The technical infrastructure required to operate these systems in Venezuela presents additional challenges. Ballistic missiles like the Oreshnik demand sophisticated support facilities, including specialized maintenance capabilities, secure storage for missiles and warheads, trained personnel for operations and maintenance, and command and control networks integrated with national leadership. While Venezuela has developed some indigenous defense industrial capabilities with Russian assistance, including the recently opened munitions factory, the technological sophistication required for Oreshnik operations may exceed current Venezuelan capabilities without substantial Russian technical assistance.

Strategic Implications and American Responses

The potential deployment of Russian missiles to Venezuela carries significant strategic implications for American defense planning and regional security architecture. From launch positions in Venezuela, Oreshnik missiles with reported ranges up to 5,500 kilometers could theoretically reach targets throughout the continental United States, though the southern states and Caribbean facilities would be most immediately threatened. This geographical reality echoes the strategic calculus that drove American responses during the Cuban Missile Crisis, when Soviet ballistic missiles positioned just 90 miles from Florida fundamentally altered the strategic balance.

Defense planners would need to consider how to counter these systems through a combination of offensive and defensive measures. The hypersonic speed and maneuverability claimed for the Oreshnik would present significant challenges for existing American missile defense systems, which are optimized primarily to intercept slower, more predictable ballistic missile trajectories. Successfully defending against multiple Oreshnik missiles simultaneously might require deployment of additional Terminal High Altitude Area Defense batteries or other advanced interceptor systems to the threatened regions.

Offensive counter-options would center on the ability to locate and destroy missile launchers before they could fire. The Oreshnik's reported road-mobile configuration would allow Venezuelan forces to disperse launchers across the country, complicating American targeting efforts. Any campaign to neutralize these systems would require persistent surveillance coverage, rapid strike capabilities, and potentially extensive operations inside Venezuelan territory. Such military operations could quickly escalate beyond limited strikes into broader conflict, raising the stakes considerably for both sides.

For Kalibr cruise missiles, American defense responses would focus on different capabilities. The subsonic flight profiles of most cruise missile variants make them more vulnerable to interception than hypersonic ballistic missiles, but defending against saturation attacks involving multiple simultaneous Kalibr launches would strain available defenses. Coastal installations and naval assets would require robust short-range air defense systems, while early warning coverage would need enhancement to provide adequate reaction time against cruise missile threats launched from Venezuelan territory.

Kremlin Signaling and Strategic Messaging

Russian statements regarding potential weapons transfers to Venezuela should be understood partly as strategic messaging directed at the United States rather than purely operational planning. Moscow has historically used threats of weapons transfers to American adversaries as bargaining chips in broader negotiations over security arrangements, arms control agreements, and regional influence. President Putin explicitly threatened to provide standoff weapons to American enemies in previous statements, framing such transfers as responses to Western military assistance to Ukraine.

The timing of Zhuravlyov's comments, coinciding with the American naval buildup in the Caribbean, suggests Russia seeks to impose potential costs on U.S. actions in Latin America and demonstrate that Moscow retains options for responding asymmetrically to American pressure. By raising the specter of advanced missiles in Venezuela, Russia may aim to complicate American military planning, generate domestic political debate about the wisdom of confronting the Maduro regime, and signal to other nations that Russia remains willing and able to support allies facing American pressure.

However, the gap between rhetorical threats and actual weapons transfers can be substantial. Russia has made similar threats regarding other nations and weapons systems over the years without always following through on deployment. The practical constraints discussed earlier regarding missile inventories, logistical challenges, and potential American responses all factor into Russian decision-making beyond the public statements of individual officials. Zhuravlyov, while a senior legislator, does not necessarily speak for Putin or the Russian military leadership when discussing potential arms transfers.

Venezuelan Perspectives and Strategic Calculations

For Venezuela, the potential acquisition of advanced Russian missile systems would represent both a significant defensive enhancement and a major strategic gamble. The Maduro government faces genuine security concerns stemming from American military presence in the region, ongoing economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and internal political opposition. Advanced air defense systems and standoff strike capabilities could theoretically provide some deterrent value against potential American military action or coercive pressure.

However, accepting deployment of Russian missiles, particularly nuclear-capable systems like the Oreshnik, would elevate Venezuela to the status of a potential nuclear flashpoint in American strategic planning. This designation would likely trigger intensified American pressure through sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and potentially direct military action to prevent or eliminate missile deployments. The historical precedent of American responses to Soviet missile deployments in Cuba demonstrates Washington's willingness to risk major conflict to prevent hostile strategic weapons from being positioned in the Western Hemisphere.

Venezuelan military capabilities to effectively operate and maintain advanced Russian missile systems also remain questionable. The country has struggled to maintain its existing Russian-supplied military equipment, with reports indicating that many Su-30 fighters and air defense systems require repairs and upgrades. Adding complex new systems would further strain limited technical expertise and resources. The degree to which Russian personnel would need to remain in Venezuela to support operations could effectively turn missile deployments into a permanent Russian military presence, raising additional sovereignty concerns.

Regional Security Environment and Broader Context

The potential for Russian missile deployments to Venezuela unfolds against a backdrop of evolving great power competition extending into Latin America. China has substantially increased its economic presence throughout the region over the past two decades, while Russia has sought to maintain political and military relationships with governments ideologically opposed to American influence. Venezuela's alignment with Russia reflects both ideological affinity and practical need for external support in the face of American pressure and economic collapse.

Other Latin American nations would need to calculate their responses to Russian missiles in Venezuela carefully. While some governments maintain relatively friendly relations with Caracas, few would welcome the militarization of the Caribbean basin or the potential for their region to become contested terrain in great power rivalry. Brazil, Colombia, and other neighbors might face pressure from both Washington and Moscow to take positions on Venezuelan missile deployments, complicating their efforts to maintain independence in foreign policy.

The Organization of American States and other regional institutions would likely become forums for diplomatic efforts to address any missile deployments. However, these organizations have proven largely ineffective in constraining Venezuelan government actions in recent years, with Caracas dismissing their criticisms and proceeding with policies regardless of regional opposition. The limited leverage available to hemispheric institutions suggests that any resolution of a missile crisis would ultimately require direct engagement between Washington and Moscow rather than regional mediation.

Assessment and Outlook

The probability of actual Oreshnik deployment to Venezuela appears limited based on current evidence, though Kalibr transfers may present a more realistic near-term possibility. The substantial logistical challenges, limited Russian missile inventories, potential for American interdiction or preemptive action, and uncertain operational benefits all argue against large-scale Oreshnik deployment in the immediate future. Russian statements appear calculated more for strategic signaling than as concrete operational planning, though this assessment could change rapidly if circumstances evolve.

More limited transfers remain plausible, potentially including additional air defense systems, containerized Kalibr cruise missiles, or technical assistance for existing Venezuelan military equipment. These lower-profile deliveries would enhance Venezuelan defensive capabilities without crossing the threshold that might trigger decisive American responses. Russia has demonstrated both capability and willingness to provide such support over many years, and the newly ratified strategic partnership treaty provides legal framework for expanded cooperation.

The situation bears continued monitoring, particularly for concrete indicators such as An-124 cargo flights to Venezuela, satellite imagery of new military installations suitable for ballistic missile deployment, or shifts in Russian public statements from possibility to commitment. The absence of such indicators would suggest that Russian statements represent strategic messaging rather than imminent operational deployments. Conversely, the appearance of these warning signs could indicate Moscow's serious intent to alter the strategic balance in the Western Hemisphere, potentially precipitating a major international crisis.

For American policy makers, the challenge lies in responding appropriately to Russian threats without overreacting to what may prove largely rhetorical posturing. Excessive military buildup in response to threats alone could prove counterproductive, straining resources and potentially driving Russia and Venezuela toward actions they might otherwise avoid. Conversely, dismissing Russian statements entirely could result in strategic surprise if Moscow proceeds with transfers. Calibrating responses to match actual rather than threatened developments while maintaining robust intelligence collection represents the essential task for managing this evolving situation.

#### Diplomatic capacity determines whether the Donroe Doctrine regionalizes cooperation and stability OR backfires, opening safe havens for violent non-states.

Oner 25 [Imdat Oner, former Turkish diplomat, recently served as Deputy of Head of Mission and Political Officer at the Turkish Embassy in Caracas, Venezuela, Policy Analyst at the Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy and PhD candidate in International Relations at Florida International University, MA International Relations, BA Political Science, “The Trump Corollary: Venezuela as the First Test of a Neo-Monroe Doctrine,” Orion Forum, 12-12-2025, https://orionpolicy.org/the-trump-corollary-venezuela-as-the-first-test-of-a-neo-monroe-doctrine/]

Ultimately, the Trump Corollary will be judged by what it delivers, not by its rhetoric. The question is whether the United States will invest the resources and diplomacy needed to address Latin America’s deeper problems or fall back on occasional shows of force. Another question is whether Washington can push back against China and other external actors without alienating the countries it wants to support.

Much will depend on Venezuela and on how the war on drugs unfolds in the Caribbean. The direction the US authorities take will reveal whether this revived Monroe Doctrine becomes a practical strategy for regional stability or a move that leads to new conflicts.

If the Trump Corollary is going to achieve strategic coherence without destabilizing the region, Washington will need to pair its shows of force with carefully calibrated diplomatic, economic, and institutional measures.

First, the United States needs a clear framework for working with key regional partners to curb drug trafficking, especially Mexico and Colombia. Rather than relying on ad‑hoc engagement, Washington could set up joint task forces on fentanyl, arms trafficking, and criminal financial networks, pairing pressure with concrete incentives. For Mexico in particular, linking security cooperation to commitments on legal migration pathways and deeper economic integration would help ensure that counter‑narcotics efforts are viewed as shared responsibilities instead of unilateral U.S. actions.

Second, Washington should set clear legal limits on the use of force against non‑state actors. Actions like sinking drug‑smuggling vessels or conducting preemptive operations can weaken regional and international support if they are not backed by transparent rules. Establishing rules-based guidelines would help prevent escalation and reduce diplomatic fallout.

Finally, the United States will need to invest in regional diplomacy, not just deterrence. Many Latin American governments instinctively push back against anything that resembles a return to Monroe‑style or Cold-War style thinking. Regular high‑level diplomatic consultations that stresses partnership rather than hierarchy, and support for multilateral regional bodies would help ease concerns about unilateralism. Even small diplomatic reassurances could make countries in the region less likely to turn to China or other outside external powers as counterweights.

#### Successful nuclear and biological attacks are uniquely likely to operate from Latin American safe havens, making regional cooperation key.

King 19 [Lawrence J. King, C1C, USAF, Service Academy Research Associate Program, Los Alamos National Laboratory, “The Radiological and WMD Threat Posed to National Security By Hezbollah in Latin America,” 6-24-2019, https://www.osti.gov/servlets/purl/1532703]

Introduction to Non-State Actors and Hezbollah

Since the beginning of the Cold War, the threat to national security posed by nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) has drastically molded American deterrence and nonproliferation tactics. For decades, the United States and its intelligence agencies preoccupied themselves with the nuclear programs of state actors and still do. Given textbook examples of nuclear and WMD-enabled regimes, such as Iran, North Korea, Iraq, Libya, and South Africa, it is hard to look past the challenges posed by state actors and onto those proliferated by non-state entities. However, with the emergence of global and regional terrorist and paramilitary organizations since the 1990s, the United States and its allies must now shift some degree of their attention to the nuclear and WMD threat imposed by non-state actors.

Terrorists and the designation of ‘non-state actor’ imply a harsh reality – the threat is not confined to boundaries, such an economy, geographical region or society, making it convenient to monitor and eradicate. Ideas and leadership are spread out across the globe. Some organizations have even developed elaborate structures that mirror those employed by successful militaries and governments. From a military perspective, terrorist and paramilitary groups are difficult enemies. The Viet-Cong in Vietnam, Taliban in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, to name a few, have made it significantly more challenging to carryout traditional operations. They blend in with the civilian population, attack and vanish without a trace, and refuse to follow the Laws of Armed Conflict or Geneva Conventions. Nation-states have found it increasingly difficult to wither these organizations via economic, military, and political means due to their mobile and dynamic natures. International constraints do not apply to non-state actors either. These constraints include alliance and economic treaties, climate and peace accords, legislative peacekeeping bodies, and rules-of-war conventions. However, perhaps more importantly, they also underline nonproliferation of nuclear weapons and the safe, authorized use of nuclear material.

The possibility and subsequent threat of nuclear material and equipment falling into the wrong hands is a distinct and real possibility. In fact, watchdog organizations, such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Center for Nonproliferation Studies (CNS), maintain respective databases detailing incidents of lost, stolen or missing nuclear material and equipment. Perusing the CNS database will show that the problem of lost, missing or stolen materials is not solely unique to Europe, North America or Asia. Rather, it is a global pandemic. While numbers are down from years ago, events still occur that warrant attention and the fear that non-state actors possess hazardous nuclear materials.

While the Middle East and North Africa act as breeding grounds for global terrorism, the United States should first and foremost be concerned with the Western Hemisphere in terms of national security. In doing so, the United States not only ensures its own security, but those of its allies, chiefly Peru, Colombia, Panama, and Chile. In an age when border security is being tested on a daily basis, the threat of violence by non-state actors throughout Latin America looms large. Adversaries range from global terrorist organizations, such as Hezbollah, to regional ones, such as Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) and Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), to various cartels. These organizations routinely traffic drugs, weapons, and people through North, Central, and South America, not to mention globally. Without a doubt, the threat posed to national security through these activities by Latin American non-state actors is real. As a result, border security must be enhanced to counter this reality. Moreover, additional attention must be given to extreme cases involving the potential use and trafficking of radiological materials. Concerning radiological and WMD threats, as well as the illicit trafficking of said materials, Hezbollah stands as the most prominent adversary to US national and regional securities in Latin America.

Hezbollah or hezb Allah, which translates to “Party of God” in Arabic, is a well-established Shiite Islamic political party, militia, and welfare group based in Lebanon.1 Following attacks against American targets throughout the 1980s, including the bombing of the US Marine Barracks in Beirut in 1983, the US State Department designated Hezbollah a terrorist organization in 1995.2 Prior to al-Qaeda’s attacks on September 11, 2001, Hezbollah claimed responsibility for more American deaths than any other terrorist organization.3 Since its inception in the early 1980s, the organization has developed significant capabilities with the help of the Iranian and Syrian governments that allow it carry out acts of terrorism.4 Hezbollah’s ability to conduct attacks was initially limited to the Middle East against Western targets and Israel, but now spans worldwide. It continues to exhibit close ties to Iran, as it receives substantial monetary and arms support from the Islamic Republic.

Latin America serves as a prime example of Hezbollah’s global reach. The terrorist organization’s operations in Latin America came under close scrutiny starting in 1992 and 1994 after the bombings of the Israeli Embassy and the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, Argentina, respectively. 5 The attacks combined claimed the lives of 115 people.6 Further allegations implicated the involvement of Iranian officials in the attacks’ plans and executions.7 Hezbollah and other extremist organizations continue to operate out of the Tri-Border Area (TBA) of Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil in South America, a hub for illicit trafficking. 8 Evidence also seems to suggest hyperactive Hezbollah activity within the sanctuary of Venezuela.9 As of 2011, the United States had documented eighty (80) operatives in South America alone with allegiance to various terrorist organizations, including Hezbollah.10 Within Latin America, the Lebanon-based group conducts illicit smuggling and trading of arms, drugs, and other contraband.11 If they thrive at controlling said cargoes, think of the relative ease they could develop radiological, chemical or biological weapons.

Non-State Acquisition of Nuclear Material and WMD

Before the developmental stage of radiological dispersal devices (RDD), also known as ‘dirty bombs,’ or other WMD, acquisition of the necessary nuclear material proves the most daunting part for any non-state entity, such as Hezbollah. Overall, RDDs perform exactly as the name suggests. They combine conventional high explosives with some kind of radioactive material to contaminate an area and induce chaos.12 WMDs, to include biological, chemical, and nuclear means, follow the same principle but on a larger scale. A simple threat analysis suggests that global and regional black markets offer the best chance at acquiring restricted nuclear material. Hezbollah’s monetary and international standing as a recognized terrorist organization would provide ample assurance to reserve restricted resources. While highly impractical, a nuclear-enabled nation-state could theoretically supply a non-state actor with material from its own facilities. The most logical combination would be Iran and Hezbollah. According to the US State Department, Iran holds the dubious label as a state sponsor of terrorism, as it supplies Hezbollah with money and arms against its archrival Israel. Iran also maintains a problematic nuclear program. Moreover, both actors have publicly made known their contempt for the United States. However, this phenomenon is highly unlikely for several reasons: stockpiles are heavily monitored, non-state actors are not trustworthy and could use the material on a whim without fear of its powers, and nation-states ultimately fear retribution from other nation-states for the transfer in the first place. Simply put, the inherent risk is too big for any nation-state to assume. As a result of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action of 2015 (JCPOA), commonly referred to as the Iran nuclear deal, the Islamic Republic of Iran is not looking to tarnish its image and open itself to retribution from Western powers. The avenues of acquisition do not end with Iran. Black markets provide another way to obtain restricted nuclear and WMD material.

In the modern age, the international community has taken steps to ensure the accountability of nuclear materials through numerous treaties and bodies. Chief among these steps include the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and IAEA. The responsibility that comes with state-ownership of nuclear material by itself is enormous. For those that maintain weapons-grade nuclear material, thermo-nuclear weapons, and other WMD, the responsibility is that much greater. However, even with all these safeguards in place, material and equipment fall into the wrong hands. Currently, Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina possess Latin America’s largest and only nuclear energy programs for means of power production. 13 While these facilities are closely monitored, the threat of material being stolen still exists. Infiltration by means of disguise or force stands as a legitimate obstacle to safety and security. Incidents range from the temporary misplacement of a gauge to a stolen piece of nuclear material or equipment.

Latin America specifically has a worrisome history involving these incidents. The CNS database details that between 2013 and 2018 approximately thirty-five (35) incidents have been reported.14 While this number may seem minute in comparison to that of the United States with over 600 incidents, the descriptions of said events raise concerns. The United States also has stricter reporting procedures than all IAEA ITDB-abiding (Incident and Trafficking Database) nations in Latin America and houses significantly more material in its borders, resulting in a higher margin of reports.15 Most the thirty-six Latin American cases involve lost, stolen and unauthorized possession of nuclear material and equipment, with many still unaccounted for to this day. The majority of incidents are not connected to nefarious intent. Take for example a truck carrying radioactive sources in Mexico in 2004. A group of men stole the truck, but shortly abandoned it a distance away, most likely after noticing its contents. They had no intent of actually stealing the restricted material.

Although small in number, incidents of nefarious intent have been recorded. A quick glance at these past events informs future threats and worries. In 2015, a 58 year-old male was arrested in Engativa, Colombia for illegally stockpiling and selling nuclear material, such as Iridium-192 and depleted uranium.16 More recently on March 19, 2019, armed men attacked a Brazilian nuclear plant uranium convoy in Rio de Janeiro.17 No material was compromised. In the instance of a convoy being attacked, nefarious and deliberate intent becomes likely. These are only two instances of dangerous activity involving nuclear material in Latin America. There very well could be other serious cases that have not been documented. While the aforementioned cases could very well be anomalies, they still occur. After a couple or few of these seemingly isolated incidents, terrorists and other non-state actors have the capacity to begin constructing a RDD or WMD. Additional requirements, such as subject matter experts, expert scientists, and instructions, are relatively easy to acquire. Hezbollah and its regional partners could very well solicit help or threaten malice against private or public subject matter experts in order to obtain talent. Even then, countless resources are available online and on the dark web to aid its efforts.

One phenomenon that has yet to be explored is the involvement of regional cartels and paramilitary groups in such operations. It is highly unlikely that Latin American cartels or paramilitary factions would ever use RDDs or WMDs against their targets. The very premise behind a cartel is stealth and to remain out of the public limelight and away from law enforcement. The nature of trafficking weapons, drugs, and persons demands isolation and secrecy. Cartels will only strike if they feel threatened or attacked in the first place. If prompted to lash out against an interrupting force, cartels almost always use conventional weapons, such as small arms. It makes perfect sense that an organization with such modus operandi would shy away from using RDDs or WMDs. Likewise, paramilitary groups, such as the ELN and PCC, also strive to operate in relative secrecy and with surprise. However, different from cartels, their objective to strike out against government targets unprompted. Take for example the actions of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) in Colombia. Being a paramilitary group, it operated out of remote, crude bases in the uninhabitable portions of the country, while assassinating and kidnapping government officials. While the FARC utilized guerilla tactics, paramilitary factions primarily espouse the use of conventional weapons and explosives to achieve their desired objectives.

While it is unlikely that cartels and paramilitary organizations would use RDDs or WMDs, the United States and its regional partners should recognize the potential role of these parties in trafficking nuclear and WMD material and equipment for financial gain. With their given skill in moving illicit cargoes, Latin American non-state actors are ideal outlets for terrorist organizations, such as Hezbollah, to acquire and move high-profile restricted material across borders. Since they are not bound to follow international laws, these regional partnerships would provide lucrative deals for both sides. The hefty payout of trafficking dangerous materials could certainly attract attention from cartels and other organizations looking to make a quick profit.

Delivery of Radiological Material and WMD

Provided that Hezbollah or other non-state organizations have the necessary material, the most feared stage of the RDD and WMD process is the system’s implementation. The international community would be correct not to expect a thermo-nuclear weapon on-par with that of the United States or nuclear weapons states of the IAEA. Dynamic and mobile terrorist cells do not have the resources, time or capacity to manufacture and store a legitimate nuclear weapon. However, this likelihood does not guarantee full security in light of ‘dirty bombs’ or biological and chemical systems.

While the size, mechanics, range and lethality of radiological and WMD devices vary across a large spectrum depending upon the target, the main problem is they still pose a threat. With the right isotope, RDDs can temporarily contaminate large areas for long amounts of time. Even with the advent of more stringent security measures at the US-Mexican border, there are concurrent loopholes in air, land, sea, and cyberspace that leave the US vulnerable. At more porous borders between Latin American countries, the possibility is quadrupled. While the prospect of trafficking nuclear and radiological material across sovereign borders looms, perhaps the most readily available and effective means of attack for an organization like Hezbollah is biological.

WMDs provide an effective avenue of attack for an organization such as Hezbollah. The examples of the Ghaddafi and Assad regimes in Libya and Syria respectively and their abilities to develop covert biological and chemical weapons still loom in the Western psyche. With the right tools, Hezbollah could do the same, if they are not closely surveilled.

The failed state of Venezuela provides Hezbollah with a sanctuary to operate out of in Latin America. In fact, regular flights connect Caracas and Teheran, making it easy for operatives to transit to and from South America. Separately, over the past year, the Bolivarian republic has seen millions of its citizens move to neighboring countries in one of our time’s greatest humanitarian crises. The US intelligence community designated Venezuela a displacement hotspot in 2019, citing the strong probability of infectious disease outbreaks.18 Many of these displaced persons settle in Colombia, Brazil, Chile, and Peru. From there they disperse around the Western Hemisphere. An infected operative could very well blend in as a refugee and spread a deadly, infectious disease around a densely-populated area of a neighboring country. By the time authorities notice the epidemic, it is already too late to contain in light of the rudimentary medical facilities available. Like human-borne suicide bombings, this form of biological attack is relatively inexpensive in Hezbollah’s view, amounting to a follower’s life, little money, and biological agent capable of being harnessed.

History teaches us that most terrorist organizations prefer a variety of delivery methods, from person-based suicide to car-based to pressure-cooker to improvised explosive device (IED) bombings and so on. In other words, they are very hard to track and prevent. Historically, Hezbollah has utilized suicide (body-based), rocket-based and vehicle-based bombing tactics, as evident in Lebanon, Syria, Israel, and Argentina. As detection technology has advanced over the years to expose more threats, so has the adversary’s ability to disguise their explosives and products. The simplest explosive device fueled by fertilizer or nitrogenous compounds might not be detectable except by the human eye. Today, gel-based explosives and more minute IEDs stand as the foremost obstacle to detection and explosive ordinance disposal (EOD) teams. Counterterrorism measures to prevent these catastrophes from occurring include: cutting-edge airport and border monitoring technology able to detect gel-like and composite explosives, new, discrete systems for detecting radiation, special municipal and federal law enforcement units dedicated to inspecting vehicles (within the shell and under the carriage), and collaboration between national agencies and departments.

If Hezbollah or another terrorist organization were to strike in Latin America, the next logical question to ask would be ‘Where?’ There are hundreds of eligible targets in the Americas, such as embassies, consulates, shared operating bases for the US military, foreign nuclear plants, foreign military bases, the Panama Canal, and urban and cultural centers. Looking at past Hezbollah activity in the Middle East, it is reasonable to surmise the organization would first target the Brazilian or Argentinian Jewish community, Israel, and the United States. Seeing as how Hezbollah has already targeted the heart of the Jewish community in Buenos Aires, the next closest and largest communities would be the ones in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (±500 and 700 miles away from the TBA respectively). The closest Israeli consulates are in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. American consulates are located nearby in the same two Brazilian cities, in addition to the US Embassy in Asunción, Paraguay. The group also boasts an affinity for military targets. Any arrival of US forces into South America could also prompt an attack.

#### Bioterror’s existential. AI and cloud labs overcome past failures.

Hiebert 25 [Kyle Volpi Hiebert, visiting fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation’s Digital Policy Hub, MA Global Citizenship, Identities and Human Rights, University of Nottingham; **internally citing** academic Roger **Brent**, senior researcher at RAND T. Greg **McKelvey** Jr., and RAND president Jason **Matheny**; the 2025 **International AI Safety Report**; a 2024 **Center for a New American Security** report; and a 2025 **MIT Technology Review** report; “AI Is Reviving Fears Around Bioterrorism. What’s the Real Risk?” CIGI Online, 6-30-2025, https://www.cigionline.org/articles/ai-is-reviving-fears-around-bioterrorism-whats-the-real-risk/]

The global proliferation of large language models (LLMs) is aggravating numerous security concerns. Among them is how artificial intelligence (AI) may enable extremists to commit bioterrorism to advance their ideological causes. Chatbots have already proven capable of advising users on how to plan attacks using lethal new forms of bacteria, viruses and toxins. Great-power competition, meanwhile, is distracting from threats posed by terrorist groups and malicious non-state actors.

In early 2023, a scientist and former UN weapons inspector, Rocco Casagrande, brought a small container to the White House for a briefing with US government officials. It was filled with a dozen easily available chemical ingredients that Anthropic’s flagship chatbot, Claude, recommended as precursors to trigger another pandemic. Casagrande’s stunt confirmed that anyone with an internet connection can now conceivably create their own weapon of mass destruction.

“It is clear that biological technology, now boosted by artificial intelligence, has made it simpler than ever to produce diseases,” write academic Roger Brent; senior researcher at RAND Corporation, T. Greg McKelvey Jr.; and RAND president, Jason Matheny. “Some individuals and groups do face barriers — say, an inability to access the right labs or facilities. But thanks to relentless technological advances, those barriers are falling apart.”

This isn’t news to Silicon Valley. Google’s Secure AI Framework identifies AI-enabled bio attacks as a concern. On the contrary, a team assembled by OpenAI looked at the issue last year, finding that GPT-4 gave users only a marginal advantage over regular internet searches in building bioweapons.

Despite that conclusion, the risk of bioterrorism isn’t static. The International AI Safety Report, produced for the 2025 Paris AI Action Summit, shows LLMs are getting far better at tasks related to biological and chemical weapons, accurately responding to queries about the acquisition and formulation of deadly agents. Assessments by the report’s authors suggest certain models’ instructions for releasing lethal substances showed an 80 percent improvement in 2024 alone.

Filling in the Gaps Left by the White House

China, Iran, North Korea and Russia are all believed to possess some capabilities to create bioweapons. However, “the unwieldiness and imprecision of bioweapons has meant that states remain unlikely to field large-scale biological attacks in the near term,” reads a report published in August 2024 by the Center for a New American Security (CNAS). By contrast, “nonstate actors — including lone wolves, terrorists, and apocalyptic groups — have an unnerving track record of attempting biological attacks, but with limited success due to the intrinsic complexity of building and wielding such delicate capabilities.” But this false sense of security is changing, warn CNAS researchers. Mostly thanks to advances in genetic science, synthetic biology and the emergence of cloud labs — discreet, automated facilities contracted to conduct remote experiments on a client’s behalf.

At the same time, the Trump White House has gutted America’s AI Safety Institute. Established during the twilight of the Biden administration, the institute was tasked with identifying, measuring and mitigating the risks of advanced AI systems. The International Network of AI Safety Institutes is carrying on with similar work — though it will now carry much less sway over American tech firms.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Central Intelligence Agency have also suffered huge losses in expertise thanks to widespread intimidation and firing of government employees by the so-called Department of Government Efficiency. Both agencies are crucial sources of global counterterrorism intelligence.

More importantly, there is a chilling effect spreading among America’s allies when it comes to sharing classified information with Washington. Officials in these countries — reportedly Five Eyes nations (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom), as well as Israel and Saudi Arabia — suspect the White House could pass intelligence on to Moscow in an effort to mend US-Russia relations. However, in a hostile geopolitical environment, the inverse applies as well. The Islamic State in March 2024 massacred attendees at a suburban Moscow concert hall, killing 139 people and injuring hundreds more. Distracted by its war in Ukraine and dismissive of foreign intelligence agencies warning of a terrorist plot targeting Russia, the Kremlin was caught flat-footed.

The Risk of Rogue Bioterrorists

Transnational terror groups and violent non-state actors are reanimating in power vacuums created by America’s withdrawal from multilateralism. They are deftly harnessing sophisticated technology such as cryptocurrencies, cyberattacks and ransomware. Encrypted messaging apps like WhatsApp and Telegram are being used to recruit new members, buy and sell weapons, fundraise and organize out of the spotlight. This trend extends beyond Islamist rebels and race-focused supremacists to include doomsday outfits like the now-defunct Zizians — a San Francisco Bay Area collective described as “the world’s first AI-inflected death cult” that sought the replacement of humanity with computer superintelligence.

“The real existential threat ahead is not from China,” two technologists wrote in January 2025 for the MIT Technology Review, lamenting talk about liberal democracies being locked in battle for AI supremacy with Beijing. Rather, they say, it comes “from the weaponization of advanced AI by bad actors and rogue groups who seek to create broad harms, gain wealth, or destabilize society.”

The fragility of AI systems themselves poses further challenges. Every major AI chatbot has proven vulnerable to jailbreaks — creative means by users to hack systems’ security protocols. This danger is being amplified exponentially by the rise of AI agents that can now execute tasks autonomously over the internet. And while lower-cost, open-source models could usher in a more even playing field when it comes to adopting AI for productivity and innovation, they have their own glaring flaws and must too be regulated accordingly.

Yet legislation from entities with jurisdictional authority over Silicon Valley is subject to ferocious lobbying efforts. California’s groundbreaking Bill SB 1047, for example, was vetoed last year by Governor Gavin Newsom after a public relations blitz by the tech industry. Worryingly, Republican law makers have also now inserted a stealth clause into their tax bill winding through Congress that would ban states and localities from regulating AI for the next decade.

In a dark twist of irony, if a tech-enabled bioterrorist attack does occur, AI will also be vital in expediting a cure. Let’s hope it never reaches that point — COVID-19 already showed how a novel virus can wreak havoc on a hyperconnected world. Odds are the next pandemic will be much worse.

#### AND, attacks from safe havens catalyze nuclear escalation from misattributed retaliation.

Beres 19 [Dr. Louis Rene Beres, Associate Professor of Political Science at Purdue University, has lectured and published extensively on the subject of nuclear terrorism, Terrorism And Global Security: The Nuclear Threat--Second Edition, Completely Revised And Updated, Routledge, 7-9-2019]

Nuclear terrorism could even spark full-scale nuclear war between states. Such war could involve the entire spectrum of nuclear conflict possibilities, ranging from a. nuclear attack upon a nonnuclear state to systemwide nuclear war. How might such far-reaching consequences of nuclear terrorism come about? Perhaps the most likely way would involve a terrorist nuclear assault against a state by terrorists "hosted" in another state. For example, consider the following scenario:

Early in the 1980s, Israel and her Arab state neighbors finally stand ready to conclude a comprehensive, multilateral peace settlement. With a bilateral treaty between Israel and Egypt already several years old, only the interests of the Palestinians—as defined by the PLO— seem to have been left out. On the eve of the proposed signing of the peace agreement, half a dozen crude nuclear explosives in the one kiloton range detonate in as many Israeli cities. Public grief in Israel over the many thousand dead and maimed is matched only by the outcry for revenge. In response to the public mood, the government of Israel initiates selected strikes against terrorist strongholds in Lebanon, whereupon the Lebanese government and its allies retaliate against Israel. Before long, the entire region is ablaze, conflict has escalated to nuclear forms, and all countries in the area have suffered unprecedented destruction.

Of course, such a scenario is fraught with the makings of even wider destruction. How would the United States react to the situation in the Middle East? What would be the Soviet response? It is certainly conceivable that a chain reaction of interstate nuclear conflict could ensue, one that would ultimately involve the superpowers or even every nuclear weapon state on the planet.

What, exactly, would this mean? Whether the terms of assessment be statistical or human, the consequences of nuclear war require an entirely new paradigm of death. Only such a paradigm would allow us a proper framework for absorbing the vision of near-total obliteration and the outer limits of human destructiveness. Any nuclear war would have effectively permanent and irreversible consequences. Whatever the actual extent of injuries and fatalities, it would entomb the spirit of the entire species in a planetary casket strewn with shorn bodies and imbecile imaginations.

This would be as true for a "limited" nuclear war as for an "unlimited" one. Contrary to continuing Pentagon commitments to the idea of selected "counterforce" strikes that would reduce the chances for escalation and produce fewer civilian casualties, the strategy of limited nuclear war is inherently unreasonable. There is, in fact, no clear picture of what states might hope to gain from counterforce attacks. This understanding is reflected by Soviet military strategy, which is founded on the idea that any nuclear conflict would necessarily be unlimited.

Nuclear War Between the Superpowers

The consequences of a strategic exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union have been the object of widespread attention. One account of these consequences is offered by Andrei D. Sakharov, the brilliant physicist who played a leading role in the development of Russia's thermonuclear capacity:

A complete destruction of cities, industry, transport, and systems of education, a poisoning of fields, water, and air by radioactivity, a physical destruction of the larger part of mankind, poverty, barbarism, a return to savagery, and a genetic degeneracy of the survivors under the impact of radiation, a destruction of the material and information basis of civilization—this is a measure of the peril that threatens the world as a result of the estrangement of the world's two superpowers. 13

Presently, U.S. strategic arsenals contain approximately 9,000 strategic weapons and 4,000 megaton equivalents. Soviet strategic forces number approximately 3,000 weapons and about 5,000 megaton equivalents.14 An exchange involving any substantial fraction of these forces could promptly destroy more than half of the urban populations in both countries. The subsequent fallout could be expected to kill upwards of 50 percent of the surviving rural inhabitants as well as create worldwide contamination of the atmosphere.15

To better understand the effects of fallout, it is useful to recognize that radiation effects have three basic forms: (1) radiation directly from the explosion; (2) immediate radioactive fallout (first twenty-four hours); and (3) long-term fallout (months and years). In areas where radioactive fallout is of particularly high intensity, individuals will be exposed to high doses of radiation regardless of shelter protection. Those who do not become prompt or short-term fatalities and have suffered radiation exposures above 100 REMs will undergo hemo tological (blood system) alterations that diminish immunological capabilities. The resultant vulnerability to infection will seriously impair prospects for long-term recovery.

The effects of a nuclear war between the superpowers, however, cannot be understood solely in terms of projected casualties. Rather, these effects must also include quantitative effects (i.e., availability of productive capacity, fuel, labor, food, and other resources); qualitative effects (i.e., political, social, and psychological damage); and interactive effects (i.e., the impact on the relationships between the social and economic factors of production).17 When these corollary effects are taken into account, it is easy to see that policy makers and public alike have typically understated the aggregate impact of nuclear war.

This point is supported by a 1975 study of the National Research Council, National Academy of Sciences, entitled Long- Term Worldwide Effects of Multiple Nuclear Weapons Detonations. Going beyond the usual litany of crude physical measures of destruction (e.g., number of human fatalities, number of cities destroyed), the report portrays the long-term, worldwide effects following a hypothetical exchange of 10,000 megatons of explosive power in the northern hemisphere. These effects are cast in terms of atmosphere and climate, natural terrestrial ecosystems, agriculture and animal husbandry, the aquatic environment, and both somatic and genetic changes in human populations.

While the report recognizes that the biosphere and the species Homo sapiens would survive the hypothesized nuclear war, it recognizes that the very idea of survival in such a context is problematic. Building upon this recognition, a more recent study prepared for the Joint Committee on Defense Production of the Congress—Economic and Social Consequences of Nuclear Attacks on the United States—identifies four discrete levels of postattack survival. This new taxonomy permits a more subtle look at the interactive effects of nuclear war and allows more precise judgments about the acceptability or unacceptability of nuclear attack damage. According to the study, there are four levels of survival, in decreasing order of damage.

1. Biological Survival of Individuals. Individuals or groups of individuals survive but not necessarily within the organized political, social, and economic structure of a modern society.

2. Regional Survival of Political Structures. Some subnational political units survive as viable entities, but without a functioning central government.

3. Survival of a Central Government. Some form of viable, central control over all preattack national territory survives, but the effectiveness of this control may vary over an extremely wide range, depending on the specific nature and pattern of the attack(s).

4. Survival Intact of Basic Societal Structure. Damage to the nation is characterized as relatively limited socially, politically and economically; nevertheless, the attack is militarily destructive. This is the concept of survival envisioned in the notion of limited or controlled nuclear war. However, it should be noted that the idea that effective strategic military attacks can be benign in their impacts on society is in dispute. It is used here as a criterion without any implicit acceptance that it can be achieved. 19

There are, however, levels of strategic exchange at which even the first listed category of survival might not be relevant. At such levels, the species itself—let alone organized political, social, and economic structures—would disappear. The plausibility of such levels is underscored by the fact that the magnitude of exchange postulated in the NAS report is really quite low. Were the superpowers to exchange between 50,000 and 100,000 megatons of nuclear explosives, rather than the 10,000 megatons assumed by the report, worldwide climatological changes would imperil the physical existence of Homo sapiens.

Worldwide Nuclear War

If nuclear terrorism should lead to worldwide nuclear war, the results would represent humankind's last and most complete calamity, defying not only our imaginations of disaster, but our customary measurements as well. As the culmination of what Camus once described as "years of absolutely insane history," worldwide nuclear war would represent the final eradication of the very boundaries of annihilation.

In technical terms, the consequences of systemwide nuclear war would include atmospheric effects; effects on natural terrestrial ecosystems; effects on managed terrestrial ecosystems; and effects on the aquatic environment.

Atmospheric effects would be highlighted by greatly reduced ozone concentrations producing increased ultraviolet radiation and a drop in average temperature. Even the possibility of irreversible climatic shifts cannot be ruled out.

Natural Terrestrial Ecosystems would be affected by systemwide nuclear war through three principal stress factors: ionizing radiation; uv-B radiation; and climatic change. The cumulative effect of these three factors would render the entire planet a "hot spot" where even vast forests would show physiological and genetic damage.21

Managed Terrestrial Ecosystems would be affected by systemwide nuclear war by radionuclide contamination of foods, chromosome breakage and gene mutations in crops, and yield-reducing sterility in seed crops. The cumulative effect of these changes would be the disappearance of the technology base for agriculture. Even if there were any significant 11 survivors, a return to normal world food production would be unimaginable.22

Aquatic effects of a systemwide nuclear war would stem from ionizing radiation from radionuclides in marine waters and fresh waters; solar uv radiation; and changes in water temperatures associated with climate. Irreversible injuries to sensitive aquatic species could be anticipated during the years of large transient increase in uv-B isolation. And the range of geographic distribution of sensitive populations of aquatic organisms could be reduced.23

#### Independently, Maduro’s abduction supercharged North Korean decapitation fears, making nuclear miscalculation inevitable.

Kim 26 [Kim Dong-Yub, Associate Professor at the University of North Korean Studies, Director of The Simyeon Institute for North Korean Studies, retired ROK Navy commander, formerly served as a North Korea specialist at the Ministry of National Defense, “Why the US Operation in Venezuela Raises the Risk of War on the Korean Peninsula,” The Diplomat, 1-5-2026, https://thediplomat.com/2026/01/why-the-us-operation-in-venezuela-raises-the-risk-of-war-on-the-korean-peninsula/]

The United States’ unprecedented aerial raid on Venezuela and the arrest of President Nicolas Maduro shattered a long-standing – if imperfect – norm of the post–World War II international order. The most dangerous aftershock is unfolding far from Caracas, in Pyongyang.

For Kim Jong Un, the extraction of a sovereign leader by U.S. special forces confirms his deepest fear: that a “decapitation strike” is not merely a theoretical concept buried in contingency plans, but a practiced instrument of U.S. policy under President Donald Trump. Washington signaled that leadership extraction can occur without warning, legal constraint, or regime assurances.

Trump’s own words following the Maduro operation have, perhaps unintentionally, intensified this danger. He framed the raid as a law-enforcement action and openly linked the operation to the recovery of national assets.

For Pyongyang, this is deeply concerning. When an adversary believes decapitation can arrive without warning, under the guise of policing or asset recovery, the rational response is to automate retaliation and compress decision time.

North Korea has already codified provisions allowing the automatic use of nuclear weapons if its leadership is attacked. In a world where guardrails have eroded, Kim’s rational response is to lower the threshold for automated retaliation. Deeper bunkerization, tighter isolation, and expanded pre-delegation of launch authority are therefore not only possible, but likely. What emerges is an indigenous version of the Cold War “Dead Hand.”

The central danger on the Korean Peninsula is not a deliberate U.S. invasion or a calculated North Korean offensive. It is miscalculation. A minor tactical movement by South Korea and U.S. forces, a communications glitch, or an unannounced drill could be misread by a panicked North Korean command as the opening move of a Maduro-style extraction. In a “use it or lose it” mindset, the pressure to fire before confirmation becomes overwhelming.

#### Upcoming negotiations provide the only opportunity to assuage those fears, especially since Trump will NOT demand complete denuclearization.

Kaneko 26 [Maya Kaneko, editor and reporter for the English news service of the World Services Section of Kyodo News, a leading Japanese news agency, “FOCUS: N. Korea may pursue active diplomacy after ruling party congress in 2026,” Kyodo News, 1-1-2026, https://english.kyodonews.net/articles/-/67766]

Since returning to the White House in January 2025, Trump has expressed willingness to reengage with Kim following their three summits between 2018 and 2019 during Trump's first term. But a meeting did not materialize during the U.S. president's Asia tour last fall, with Pyongyang showing no reaction.

During the upcoming congress, the date of which has yet to be announced, Pyongyang is widely expected to declare the completion of the five-year national defense plan adopted during the previous party gathering in January 2021 and advocate the policy of simultaneously promoting the development of nuclear and conventional weapons.

The existing five-year plan covers the diversification of North Korea's nuclear arsenal and the development of hypersonic weapons, military reconnaissance satellites and nuclear-powered submarines among other goals.

Under the simultaneous weapons development policy, Pyongyang will likely focus on tactical nuclear warheads that could be used in a contingency with South Korea as well as the modernization of conventional armed forces including drones, O'Carroll said.

"Having significantly strengthened its nuclear deterrent, it would make strategic sense for Pyongyang to place greater emphasis on conventional capabilities, which are better suited to deterring and responding to low-level military contingencies," said Tong Zhao, senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

The simultaneous policy will come as inter-Korean tensions remain, with Pyongyang framing the two countries as "hostile to each other," despite South Korean President Lee Jae Myung presenting a conciliatory posture.

Still, Noboru Yamaguchi, visiting professor at the International University of Japan, cast doubt on the possibility that North Korea could significantly modernize its conventional weapons to keep up with the standards of South Korea, citing its weak economy and priorities so far given to nuclear and missile development.

Shunji Hiraiwa, professor at Nanzan University, said he believes Pyongyang had resolved not to engage in dialogue with the United States while the five-year defense plan was in place, instead turning to Russia as a cooperation partner.

In recent years, Pyongyang and Moscow have strengthened their partnership, especially in the military field, with North Korean troops dispatched to aid Russia in its war against Ukraine and Russian military technology believed to have been provided to North Korea.

Hiraiwa said Pyongyang's alignment with Moscow was also aimed at rebalancing its relations with China, North Korea's major economic benefactor on which Pyongyang was heavily dependent, so that it can secure the backing of both Moscow and Beijing in the international arena.

"Through its achievements in the five-year defense plan, North Korea must have confidence in its greatly improved nuclear capabilities. The country has also successfully obtained support from both Russia and China, setting the stage for Pyongyang to face off with the United States," the Nanzan University professor said.

With Trump expected to revisit Asia in April for talks with Chinese President Xi, Hiraiwa said the chances are high that a Trump-Kim meeting will take place after the U.S.-China summit because the American president sees managing relations with the Asian powerhouse as the most pressing matter.

As for the goals of the possible U.S.-North Korea talks, Zhao of the Washington-based think tank said Trump may move toward "more limited objectives" rather than the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, as Russia and China have effectively accepted Pyongyang's nuclear status.

"Renewed summitry would serve Kim's strategic interests by further reducing North Korea's international isolation, advancing the normalization of its nuclear status, mitigating perceived U.S. threats and creating more favorable conditions for long-term economic development by easing sanctions pressure," Zhao said.

#### Diplomatic incompetence will provoke nuclear crises. Expert capacity prevents inadvertent escalation.

Beres 26 [Louis René Beres, Emeritus Professor of International Law at Purdue, “North Korea Is Not Venezuela: The Real Risks of Trump’s Nuclear Brinkmanship,” JURISTnews, 1-14-2026, https://www.jurist.org/commentary/2026/01/north-korea-is-not-venezuela-the-real-risks-of-trumps-nuclear-brinkmanship/]

To continue these clarifications, history will deserve some pride of place. At the Singapore Summit on June 12, 2018, Donald Trump promised Americans that North Korea was no longer a nuclear war threat. This was the case, assured the president, because he and Kim Jong Un had “fallen in love.”

But the dissembling second Trump presidency suggests rising risks of military confrontation between Washington and Pyongyang. Whether or not such a confrontation would result in nuclear war, however, cannot be determined scientifically.[3] In logic and mathematics, meaningful determinations of probability depend on the frequency of past events. Regarding such determinations, there have been no pertinent events.[4]

That’s a good thing. At the same time, the United States needs to render informed judgments on the plausibility of a nuclear war in this potential theatre of direct military conflict. To a significant but indeterminable extent, these judgments will depend on whether relevant belligerent risks would arise from deliberate or inadvertent nuclear escalations.

For the American president, there will be consequential nuances. More specifically, an inadvertent nuclear war with North Korea could be the result of decision-maker miscalculation, enemy hacking, computer error or mechanical/electrical accident. In the final analysis, though these risks could be expressions of individual leadership personality,[5] they are most apt to stem from inherently corrosive competitions for “escalation dominance.”[6] Inter alia, these risks would reflect the continuously “Westphalian” structure of world politics,[7] an always-unstable 17th century foundation that could at any point descend into unprecedented chaos.[8]

On such strategic matters, it is high time for candor. In significant measure, President Donald J. Trump’s incremental policy misunderstandings are setting the stage for nuclear crises with North Korea.[9] Earlier, when Trump ranted that “attitude is more important than preparation,” Kim positioned his nation for purposeful strategic planning.

Invariant Obligations of Correct Reasoning

During any upcoming crisis negotiations with North Korea, Mr. Trump should take scrupulous care not to exaggerate or overstate America’s military risk-taking calculus. Such diplomatic caution would derive in part from the absence of comparable nuclear crises. In world politics, as in any other subject of human interaction, probability judgments can never be derived ex nihilo, out of nothing.

This does not mean that Trump’s senior strategists and counselors should steer away from clear-eyed assessments regarding potential nuclear costs and risks, but rather that such assessments be drawn from shifting and hard-to-decipher geopolitical trends. Such significant trends should include variously complex considerations of worldwide nuclearization.[10] Though temporarily set back by US and Israeli preemptions in June 2025, Iran has returned to the task of nuclear weapons development.[11] In time, and in much the same fashion as its engagements with North Korea, the United States could find itself in a larger war with Iran. Such conflict would be plausible even if Tehran were to call upon Pyongyang to act as its belligerent nuclear proxy.

Intersections and Synergies

In such complex geopolitical assessments, the world should be examined as a system. For Trump policy-planners focused on North Korea, there will be variously fixed obligations to consider, including intersections between Pyongyang’s nuclear escalation threats and Tehran’s re-started nuclearization. These obligations should take note of certain synergistic intersections. By definition, in such intersections, the “whole” of any conflict outcome would be greater than the sum of its “parts.”

There is more. These many-sided strategic issues ought never to be approached from the narrow perspectives of domestic politics. Plainly, some component problems would emerge as more complicated and problematic than others. As relevant intellectual background, world security processes should always be approached as a totality. What is happening now, in such far-flung places as India-Kashmir, China, Russia, Ukraine, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Yemen could at some point have significant “spillover effects” in the northeast Asian theatre, and beyond.[12]

“My Button is Bigger Than Yours”

In one form or another, military threats from nuclear North Korea remain worrisome, substantive and “robust.” President Donald Trump’s ill-suited metaphors notwithstanding, the fact that his nuclear “button” is “bigger” than Kim’s (a statement made originally during “Trump 1”) is anything but meaningful. In all strategic deterrence relationships, a condition of relative nuclear weakness by one of the contending adversarial states need not imply any corollary diminution of military power. Even the presumptively weaker party in such asymmetrical dyads could deliver “unacceptable damage” to the stronger.

Although bewildering ipso facto, complexity could be crisis-defining. President Trump will need to bear in mind that many or all of northeast Asia’s continuously transforming developments could be impacted by “Cold War II,” an oppositional stance with Russia and (somewhat comparably or derivatively) with China. Similarly, important will be this US leader’s willingness to acknowledge and factor-in the consequential limits of “expert” military advice. These widely unseen limits are not based on any presumed intellectual inadequacies among America’s flag officers, but on the irrefutable knowledge that no person has ever fought in a nuclear war. In scientific terms (i.e., theory of probability) this bit of knowledge ought never to be underestimated or disregarded.

By definition – and going forward with all time-urgent considerations of US- North Korea policy formation – American strategic calculations will be fraught with daunting uncertainties. Still, it will be necessary that Donald Trump and his designated counselors remain able to offer best available war-related estimations. Among prospectively causal factors – some of them overlapping, interdependent or “synergistic”[13] – the risks of a nuclear war between Washington and Pyongyang will ultimately depend on whether such a conflict would be intentional, unintentional or accidental. In principle, at least, this tripartite distinction could prove vitally important to any hoped-for success in US nuclear war prediction and prevention efforts.

There is more. In facing future North Korean negotiations, it will be necessary that competent US policy analysts capably examine and carefully measure all foreseeable configurations of nuclear war risk. Expressed in the useful game-theoretic parlance of formal military planning, shifting configurations in the “state of nations”[14] could present themselves singly (one-at-a-time, the expected best case for Washington) or suddenly—unexpectedly, with apparent “diffusiveness,” or in overlapping “cascades” of strategic complexity.

Quo Vadis?

What is to be done? To properly understand such analytically dense cascades will require properly-honed, well-developed and formidable intellectual skills. Accordingly, this will not be a task for the intellectually faint-hearted. It will require, instead, sharply-refined combinations of historical acquaintance, traditional erudition and demonstrated capacity for advanced dialectical thinking. Clarifying elucidations of such disciplined thinking go back to the dialogues of Plato and to the ancient but timeless awareness that reliable analysis always calls for the continuously sequential asking and answering of interrelated questions.

This is a challenging task. It could require American strategic thinkers who are as comfortable with the classical prescriptions of Plato and Descartes as with more narrowly technical elements of modern military theory. Consequently, it will not be an easy task to fulfill.

There is more. Not all nuclear wars would have the same origin. It is conceivable that neither Washington nor Pyongyang is currently paying sufficient attention to residually specific risks of an unintentional nuclear war. To this point, each president would seem to assume the other’s decisional rationality.[15] If there were no such mutual calculation, it would make no ascertainable sense for either side to negotiate further security accommodations with the other.

Viable nuclear deterrence (not “denuclearization”) should be the overriding US strategic goal vis-a-vis North Korea. But this complicated objective is contingent on certain basic assumptions concerning enemy rationality. Are such assumptions realistic in the case of a potential war between two already-nuclear powers?

If President Donald Trump should sometime fear enemy irrationality in Pyongyang, issuing threats of a US nuclear retaliation could make diminishing diplomatic sense. At that unprecedented stage, American national security could come to depend upon some presumptively optimal combinations of ballistic missile defense and defensive first strikes. Nonetheless, by definition, determining such combinations would lack any decisional input or counsel from concrete and quantifiable historical data.

In an imaginably worst case scenario, the offensive military element could entail a situational or comprehensive preemption – a defensive first strike by the United States[16] – but at that manifestly late stage, all previous hopes for bilateral reconciliation would already have become moot. There would then obtain no “ordinary” circumstances wherein a preemptive strike[17] against a North Korean nuclear adversary could be considered “rational.”[18] What then? Whatever the answer, it is an intellectual question, not a political one.

There is more. None of these strategic decisions should be reached casually. With the expanding development of “hypersonic” nuclear weapons, figuring out optimal US policy combinations from one North Korean crisis to another could quickly become overwhelming. Though counterintuitive amid such prominently intersecting complications, the fact that one “player” (the US) was recognizably “more powerful” than the other (North Korea) could prove irrelevant.

Law and Strategy

In foreseeable circumstances, there would be overlapping issues of law and strategy. Under international law, which remains an integral part of US law,[19] the option of a selective or comprehensive defensive first-strike might sometime be correctly characterized as “anticipatory self-defense.” But this would be the case only if the American side could argue persuasively that the security “danger posed” by North Korea was “imminent in point of time.”

Such discernible “imminence” is required by the authoritative standards of international law; that is, by the formal criteria established after an 1837 naval incident famously called “The Caroline.”[20] Presently, offering aptly precise characterizations of “imminence” could prove confusingly abstract and densely problematic.[21]

For the moment, it seems reasonable that Kim Jong Un would value his own personal life and the survival of his nation above every other imaginable preference or combination of preferences. Despite his occasional bluster, Kim appears to be visibly and technically rational, and should therefore remain subject to US nuclear deterrence.[22] Still, going forward, it could become important for a negotiating American President to distinguish between authentic instances of enemy irrationality and instances of contrived or pretended irrationality.[23] This vague prospect adds yet another layer of complexity to the subject at hand, one that could at some point include assorted force-multiplying synergies.

In history, wars have often been the result of leadership miscalculation. Though neither side here would likely seek a shooting war, either Kim or Trump could still commit various errors in the course of rendering strategic calculations. At times, such consequential errors could represent an unintended result of jointly competitive searches for “escalation dominance.“[24] These errors are more apt to occur in circumstances where one or both presidents first decided to reignite threatening and hyperbolic rhetoric.

Even in reassuringly calm periods of polite diplomatic discourse, major miscalculations, accidents or “cyber-confusions” could accumulate. Such patently ill-fated accumulation could be hastened by unpredictable effects of a widespread disease pandemic. What then?

In more worst case scenarios,[25] negotiations gone wrong could result in a nuclear war.[26] This tangible prospect ought never to be overlooked. In the incontestable words of Swiss playwright Friedrich Durrenmatt, “The worst does sometimes happen.”[27]

Inadvertent Nuclear War with North Korea

An inadvertent nuclear war between Washington and Pyongyang could take place not only as the result of misunderstanding or miscalculation between fully rational national leaders, but also as the unintended consequence (singly or synergistically) of mechanical, electrical, computer malfunctions or “hacking”-type interventions. Going forward, these interventions could include clandestine intrusions of “cyber-mercenaries.”

While an accidental nuclear war would necessarily be inadvertent, certain forms of inadvertent nuclear war would not necessarily be caused by mechanical, electrical or computer accident. These difficult to anticipate but consequential forms of unintentional nuclear conflict would represent the unexpected result of some specific misjudgment or miscalculation, whether created by singular decisional error by one or both sides to a two-party nuclear crisis escalation or by still-unforeseen “synergies” arising between assorted singular miscalculations.[28]

In any upcoming crisis between Washington and Pyongyang, each side would strive to maximize two critical goals simultaneously: (1) to dominate the dynamic and largely unpredictable process of nuclear crisis escalation; and (2) to achieve “escalation dominance” without sacrificing vital national security interests. This second objective would mean preventing one’s own state and society from suffering catastrophic or existential harms.

In such circumstances, having a “bigger button” could become a source of weakness, not strength. Here, size would matter, but only in an unexpected or counter-intuitive way. It follows, among other things, that to take comfort from observing that North Korea was previously testing “only” shorter-range ballistic missiles would be to miss the point. Already during “Trump 1,” several of North Korea’s nuclear test firings expressed yields at least 16 times larger than the Hiroshima bomb. That 14KT WW II bomb (a “small” nuclear weapon today) produced almost 100,000 immediate fatalities.

Such vital understandings about nuclear “button size” would continue as long as Kim Jong Un’s “inferior” nuclear arms remained seemingly invulnerable to American preemptions and seemingly capable of penetrating ballistic missile defenses in the United States, Japan and/or South Korea. Because of the extraordinary harms generated by even “low-yield” nuclear weapons, a small percentage or tiny fraction of Kim’s “inferior” nuclear arsenal would still register as “unacceptably destructive” in Washington, Tokyo and Seoul. Worth noting as well is that in all these critical dimensions of strategic judgment, the only reality that would figure tangibly in adversarial calculations would be perceived reality.

An Issue of Overwhelming Complexity

The bottom line of all such informed assessments concerning US-North Korea nuclear war is that the underlying issues of contention and calculation are starkly complicated and potentially indecipherable. Faced with endlessly challenging layers of complexity, both operational and legal,[29] each side should proceed warily and in a fashion that is recognizably risk-averse. Though such prudent counsel could appear counter to US obligations of “escalation dominance,” any future Trump-Kim crises could take place in uncharted operational “waters.”

Looking ahead, any aggressive over-confidence (or what the ancient Greeks called “hubris” in tragic drama) by President Trump or President Kim ought to be avoided. While everything at some upcoming negotiation might first appear simple and calculable, history calls to mind Prussian strategist Carl von Clausewitz’s observation about “friction.” Succinctly, this ubiquitous fly in the ointment references “differences between war on paper, and war as it actually is.”

To avoid intolerable crisis outcomes between the United States and North Korea, a prudent, science-based[30] and informed nuclear posture should be fashioned, not with evident clichés but with refined intellect and cultivated erudition. The ancient Greeks and Macedonians had already understood that war planning should be treated as a disciplined matter of “mind over mind,” not one of “mind over matter.”[31]

Averting “Nightmare”

It would be best for the United States to plan carefully for all strategic eventualities and not to stumble into a nuclear war with North Korea – whether deliberate, unintentional or accidental. The fact that any such “stumble” could take place without any adversarial ill will or base motive should provide little palpable consolation. An ounce of diplomatic prevention will be well worth avoiding a strategic nightmare.

### 1AC---Plan

#### Plan:

#### The United States Federal Government should restore collective bargaining under the Foreign Service Act of 1980.

### 1AC---Solvency

#### Contention 2 is Solvency:

#### It restores CBRs to relevant FSOs by enjoining at least section 3 of EO 14251---any alternative fails to stop loss in time.

---this is from after the first injunction, asking for a new one, i.e. the plan

Hirn et al. 25 [Richard J. Hirn, Keith R. Bolek, April H. Pullium, Attorneys at O’Donoghue & O’Donoghue LLP, Sharon L. Papp, General Counsel, and Raeka Safai, Deputy General Counsel at the American Foreign Service Association; Counsels for Plaintiff, American Foreign Service Association; “MEMORANDUM OF POINTS AND AUTHORITIES SUPPORTING PLAINTIFF AMERICAN FOREIGN SERVICE ASSOCIATION’S MOTION FOR PRELIMINARY INJUNCTION,” *AFSA v. Trump*, U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, 1:25-cv-01030-PLF, 5-27-2025, https://clearinghouse-umich-production.s3.amazonaws.com/media/doc/160297.pdf]

The President’s Executive Order constitutes an unlawful official action that is ultra vires. Although Section 4103(b) permits the President to exclude particular department subdivisions where bargaining is incompatible with national security requirements, he used that section to exclude entire Departments and Agencies, along with all of their Foreign Service employees, from the statute. The Director of the Office of Personnel Management (“OPM”), Defendant Ezell, then issued Guidance on Executive Order Exclusions from Federal Labor-Management Programs (“Guidance”) that relies upon the unlawful order to advise agencies on how to engage in further unlawful activity. The Secretary of State and Acting Administrator of USAID, Defendant Rubio, acted upon the unlawful Executive Order and Guidance to remove Foreign Service members from the FSLMRS’s coverage.

In so doing, the Defendants inflict immeasurable and irreparable harm upon the Foreign Service members and AFSA, their exclusive bargaining representative. The Defendants deprived the employees of their statutory rights to organize and bargain collectively, which courts have repeatedly found to constitute irreparable harm. The deprivation has concrete, tell-tale signs of such harm in this case. AFSA’s elected officers, who represent Foreign Service members on a daily basis, have had their official time (that is, time they could use for representing employees) taken away, which will force those officers to return to the field. Defendants have closed AFSA’s offices, where its staff handled the day-to-day representation of employees. AFSA’s dues revenue will be terminated on April 18, 2025. These actions were taken against AFSA because of its exercise of its First Amendment rights to free speech and to petition the government through its lawsuits, which, by definition, also constitutes irreparable harm.

But, most importantly, Foreign Service employees have been irreparably injured because they have lost the ability to bargain collectively over a wide range of employment conditions when it matters the most. The Defendants are implementing sweeping changes across State and USAID. The rights to organize and bargain collectively give Foreign Service members a voice in how decisions are implemented and how adverse effects can be mitigated. These rights provide AFSA with the ability to hold State and USAID accountable when they fall short of their legal obligations. There is no adequate remedy to address this loss because union representation matters in real time. It cannot be recreated after-the-fact when the changes have been implemented and the harms to employees have become irremediable.

Given this irreparable harm, along with its substantial likelihood of success on the merits, AFSA seeks to enjoin the implementation and enforcement of Sections 1(b), 3 and (6) of the Executive Order, as well as the OPM’s Guidance on the order. Such an order would preserve what has existed for over half a century: Foreign Service employees having the right to organize and bargain collectively with their employers with respect to employment conditions and to resolve disputes through established procedures. The Defendants will not suffer any injury by simply adhering to that status quo. Moreover, the order will further the public interest, given that Congress has already found the employees’ rights to organize and bargain collectively “safeguard[ ] the public interest” and “contribute[ ] to the effective conduct of public business….” 22 U.S.C. § 4101(1)(A) & (B). Thus, AFSA’s requested preliminary injunction satisfies the four factors required by this Circuit’s precedent. Accordingly, AFSA respectfully requests that the Court issue the proposed preliminary injunction that accompanies the motion.

#### It’s both necessary and sufficient:

#### First, performance. It’s the litmus test for job security, enabling FSOs to put their mission first (i.e. specifically, to bid on a posting because they believe they can best contribute, not because they think it’s less likely to get targeted for RIFs)---and that’s reverse causal---consensus of experts and a century of empirics.

Shannon 25 [Thomas A. Shannon, Jr., Chairman of the American Academy of Diplomacy; with the **leadership, membership and several former Chairmen of the AAD**; Ex-Officio G. Philip Hughes of the **Council of American Ambassadors**, Jo Ellen Powell of the Una Chapman Cox Foundation, and Susan Johnson of the **Association for Diplomatic Studies & Training**; and Program Contributors The **Annenberg Foundation**, **Arthur Ross Foundation**, The **Dillon Fund**, and **Sisco Family Fund**; “Ending Collective Bargaining Rights for National Security Agencies Is a Profound Mistake,” 4-1-2025, https://30bf63e6-4b45-4fc8-a24a-c8012a461603.usrfiles.com/ugd/886c61\_952cbd6fa8294f4694fdbb4593258ff8.pdf]

“We, the members of the American Academy of Diplomacy, oppose the Executive Order issued on March 27, 2025, ending collective bargaining rights for employees of national security agencies, including the Department of State. The American Academy of Diplomacy is a non-partisan organization of retired United States Ambassadors and other national security professionals dedicated to protecting American interests and promoting American values through diplomacy. We have all served under the 1978 Civil Service Reform Act and the 1980 Foreign Service Act establishing collective bargaining rights for federal employees. We strongly believe, as the latter law states, that “a career Foreign Service, characterized by excellence and professionalism, is essential in the national interest to assist the President and the Secretary of State in conducting the foreign affairs of the United States.”

Many of us are or were members of unions that are the collective bargaining units for our former agencies, including the Foreign Service Officers of the Departments of Commerce, Agriculture, and others. From our own experience, we know that these unions, and the collective bargaining processes through which employees engage with federal management, created stability and discipline in the workplace and enhanced the ability of our diplomats and national security professionals to carry out the directives of each and every president since these Acts were approved by the Congress. The effort to rescind these rights, and violate the clear requirements of law, far from enhancing the ability of the president to conduct foreign policy, will undermine that ability by withdrawing the protections and guarantees that have represented the respect and commitment of the American people for the important and often dangerous work of our national security professionals. The recission of these rights and the legal actions the Executive Order invites misdirect attention that would be better placed on advancing our national interests around the world. Opening the federal workforce to intimidation, harassment, and mistreatment, and attempting to politicize a professional workforce that has been a faithful and nonpartisan partner of our elected leadership for over 100 years since the establishment of the Foreign Service, is a profound mistake. We urge President Trump to rescind this executive order.”

#### Second, enforcement. FSOs only trust negotiated procedures---NOT rehiring incentives or already-broken promises to consult or follow old merit procedures---BUT it’s NOT too late, provided CBRs are restored.

--most of the evidence for this claim is actually provided by the 2nd Heller card on the advantage, not this card, which is really just answering CPs

Dinkelman 25 [John W. Dinkelman, 40 years of distinguished service at the Department of State, including as acting Assistant Secretary of State for Administration and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Logistics Management, current president of the American Foreign Service Association, “Trump’s State Department Cuts Are a Self-Inflicted Wound,” Foreign Policy, 8-14-2025, https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/08/14/state-department-reform-trump-rubio-layoffs-afsa/]

Moreover, the Trump administration’s reform process was not deliberate. Contrary to Kroenig’s account, the department did not “work for months to get the reorganization right.” A survey of nearly 200 AFSA members who lost their jobs on July 11 revealed they were fired even after the department, in its official notification of the reorganization to Congress, stated that there would be “no significant changes” to its offices. State Department officials said suggestions were “solicited” across the agency, but the lack of transparency in the decision-making process makes us believe that all key choices were made by a small circle of insiders with little or no experience in foreign affairs or managing the department’s complex operations.

Under previous administrations, any potential Foreign Service layoffs had a clear, merit-based process that ranked employees globally on performance, tenure, foreign language ability, and military veteran status, then the hard calls were made. However, just three days before the July 11 layoffs, the Trump administration scrapped those criteria. The only thing that mattered was where an employee was assigned on May 29, directly contradicting the testimony of Michael Rigas, deputy secretary of state for management and resources, to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

The result was predictable: Seasoned officers with critical language skills—including Russian, Arabic, and Chinese—veterans with disabilities, and people already assigned to high-priority hardship posts were shown the door without consideration for their service or expertise. Imagine closing a military base and firing every soldier stationed there, regardless of rank, record, or pending assignments.

There is still time to avert the cuts’ long-term damage to the United States’ diplomatic power, but only if State Department leadership recognizes its errors and changes course now. Since the mass layoffs, the department has reversed dozens of its decisions, inviting some employees to return to their duties. This is a step in the right direction, but leadership needs to go further. If they truly believe the department is overstaffed, then they should return to the previously agreed-upon reduction-in-force rules that had been in effect for decades, demonstrate what fields are overstaffed, and proceed with their reorganization plan accordingly.

The United States’ adversaries are watching this self-inflicted wound. The question is whether the country has the will to staunch it before it does permanent damage.

#### FSLRB has a quorum---AND is trusted to fairly enforce because it’s staffed by former FSOs.

Mangino 25 [Evan Mangino, Vice President, Foreign Agricultural Service, USDA, “FSLRB Appointments,” Foreign Service Journal, January-February 2025, https://afsa.org/sites/default/files/flipping\_book/010225/53/]

Congratulations to the two new members of the Foreign Service Labor Relations Board (FSLRB) appointed on Nov. 4 by FSLRB Chair Susan Tsui Grundmann under procedures prescribed by the Foreign Service Act of 1980.

The three-member board decides labor management disputes between AFSA and the Foreign Service agencies, including deciding negotiability appeals and appeals of implementation disputes decided by the Foreign Service Grievance Board (FSGB).

The new members are Garber A. Davidson Jr., a retired Foreign Service officer [FSO] and former chair of the FSGB, for a three-year term, and Cheryl M. Long, a retired judge and former member of the FSGB, for a two-year term.

Davidson and Long replaced outgoing members Amb. (ret.) Dennis K. Hays and Amb. (ret.) Thomas J. Miller. AFSA thanks them all for their service.

#### Third, resources. The confidence provided by union win rates and lawyers are vital to perseverance in the face of demoralization and willingness to guardrail reckless policy implementation.

Rubin 25 [Eric Rubin, former U.S. ambassador to Bulgaria, served almost 40 years in the State Department, former president of AFSA, “The Way Ahead,” The Foreign Service Journal, September-October 2025, https://afsa.org/sites/default/files/flipping\_book/091025/18/]

3. Fear is an effective tool. In fact, it seems to be the primary tool in this administration’s tool kit as far as career employees are concerned.

There are two explicit goals to instilling fear in the workforce: first, to get employees to quit or retire in large numbers to achieve the slash-and-burn reductions that have been promised, and second, to ensure that those employees who remain will be afraid to speak up, dissent, or disagree.

We have fallen so far in half a year: Before Inauguration Day, we had a Secretary of State who encouraged constructive dissent, revived the Dissent Channel, and read every message submitted through it.

4. Diplomacy has been sidelined, and with it the Foreign Service. Senior career officers, Civil Service and Foreign Service alike, have been sidelined. There are no senior career officers on the National Security Council staff following the Laura Loomer–directed purges, and there are no senior career officers in policymaking positions at State.

There are senior career officers in “Senior Bureau Official” or “Acting” positions, but these are not confirmed by the Senate and, by definition, are not policy making jobs.

The fact that for the first time since the 19th century, the administration had not (as of early July) nominated a single career Foreign Service officer for an ambas sadorship or assistant secretary position speaks volumes about the disrespect for and disregard of our career expertise and experience.

This is an unprecedented development in the 101-year history of the modern Foreign Service and offers a pessimistic perspective for Foreign Service career development in coming years.

Further, the proposed surge in defense spending, combined with the biggest proportional cuts in spending on diplomacy and development in our nation’s modern history, makes clear where the priorities lie.

5. We won’t soon recover from the dev astation of the past six months, and further devastation lies ahead. Mid-level and senior expertise cannot easily be replaced and reconstituted. We can hope that a future president might ask Congress for the authority to bring back career employ ees who left on good terms and who want to return, but in real life, people move on. The number of those who might want to return is likely to be small.

6. We will not easily recover from the politicization of our nonpartisan, apolitical career Foreign Service. Members of Trump’s inner circle say that the Foreign Service is a hotbed of far-left radicals who hate their country and seek to undermine our elected leaders, but we know this is false. I never once saw a colleague try to undermine or fail to carry out a president’s policy instructions in my 38-plus years in the Service. Not once.

The Way Forward

All that said, it is incumbent on all of us to do what we can to prevent further destruction and to start thinking now about how we can repair the damage and reconstitute our Service in the future. USAID is never coming back, but development assistance must.

The Foreign Service will not soon resemble what it was a mere six months ago; but we know that our country needs diplomacy and needs diplomatic expertise, experience, and talent. And that is what the U.S. Foreign Service has to offer.

It is not incumbent on any of us to try to save our country from its elected leadership. Nor is any one of us responsible for the policies established by our leaders. It is a very personal decision whether to stay or to leave, but I would urge my active-duty colleagues to stay if they feel they can do so.

The next president is going to need the Foreign Service, and it will be a huge disadvantage if even more of our best talent vanishes ahead of the next election.

That said, anyone who is confronted by what they view as an illegal or immoral order must decide whether to carry it out. In the past, it was easy to request reassign ment, but that may no longer be an option for most members of the Foreign Service in the current climate.

The choice may be stark. It’s a lot easier for someone who already has qualified for full retirement benefits to decide to leave than it would be for someone with less than 20 years of service. At the end of the day, it has to be an individual decision: No one should tell friends and colleagues how to navigate this scary and difficult time.

I hope that those who want to stay will be able to stay, RIFs notwithstanding. But I also have enormous respect for those who decide they cannot.

Finally, in unity there is strength. If anyone was skeptical about the need for AFSA and for union representation in January, I hope that few are today. AFSA has spoken out forcefully and has won battles that individual employees could not possibly fight.

#### That’s empirically determinative of foreign policy success in particular---despite loyalist appointees.

Carati & Locatelli 25 [Andrea Carati, Associate Professor in Political Science and International Relations at the University of Milan, PhD Political Studies, University of Milan, Italy; and Andrea **Locatelli**, Associate Professor at the Catholic University in Milan, PhD Political Science, University of Florence, Italy; “Conclusion,” *Taming the President: Trump, the Advisory System, and the Mechanisms of US Foreign Policy Decision-Making*, De Gruyter, 8-22-2025, ISBN 9783111382852, p.146-151]

Conclusion

American foreign policy has been the subject of countless historical and political analyses. The role of the United States in the world, particularly since the Second World War, has invariably attracted the attention of generations of scholars. in an increasingly changing international order, studying American foreign policy with the tools of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) has become an urgent task. Today, after his re-election in 2024, it is probably even more important to study Donald Trump and his foreign policy choices. Although he does not bear sole responsibility for the current crisis of the Liberal International Order (LIO), he has certainly accelerated it. At the time of writing, the second Trump administration has just taken office, and already seems markedly different from the first. Admittedly, one cannot claim to assess the foreign policy of a newly-installed administration after just one month. However, the flurry of Executive Orders, presidential tweets, and the bureaucratic shake-up have led many to believe that this second term is going to be different. Most analysts and pundits seem to agree that in his second mandate the President will be more effective in implementing his revolutionary agenda (Brands 2025; Kimmage 2025). Whether they are right or wrong depends on a multitude of factors, but we believe that the arguments presented in this volume allow us to shed light on this momentous issue.

The first four years of Trump’s presidency remain of interest because they provide the empirical basis for analysing the dynamics of his leadership. More specifically, the two essential factors identified in the book – establishment resistance and his personality traits – remain central to his second term. Today, we can only measure the true discontinuities of Trump’s foreign policy against his first term, on the basis of a rigorous analysis of what really happened during his first four years as President. The policy outcomes of the second term will depend on the same variables and the same kind of interaction between Trump’s leadership style, whose hallmarks will remain similar, and the resistance or accommodation he will meet in his new inner circle of advisers. The final verdict may remain open: whether Trump’s second presidency will be more or less effective than his first is difficult to predict, but in the end his achievements (or lack thereof) will continue to be explained by the configuration of the advisory system he has surrounded himself with.

In this book we have endeavoured to offer the reader an empirical account of Donald Trump’s mixed record in foreign policy and a theoretical model to explain this apparent puzzle. In order to show the variation in outcomes regarding the President’s revolutionary agenda, we have analysed the US approach to three inter national institutions: NATO, the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the World Health Organization (WHO). Specifically, considering the oppositional stance of the President towards International Organisations (IOs), we have highlighted how these cases illustrate the limits of Trump’s ability to translate his confrontational rhetoric into concrete policy shifts.

The case of NATO, analysed in the fourth chapter, exemplifies the greatest misalignment between intentions and current policy. While Trump’s public statements between 2017 and 2018 suggested a deep scepticism towards the Alliance – including threats to withdraw the United States altogether – his administration ultimately strengthened America’s military presence in Europe. This outcome was largely due to the role played by a cohesive and competent inner circle committed to preserving transatlantic security. Figures such as James Mattis, Mike Pompeo, and John Bolton acted as stabilising forces, mitigating Trump’s most extreme impulses and ensuring continuity in deterrence strategies towards Russia. Their suc cess in countering the President’s unilateralist instincts was made possible by Trump’s lack of experience in security issues, as well as their ability to work together and overcome dissenting voices in the inner circle.

In contrast, the fifth chapter reveals a very different dynamic in the domain of trade policy, particularly in relation to the WTO. Here, Trump was able to act with far greater autonomy, thanks to an advisory system that was largely aligned with his views. By surrounding himself with protectionist hardliners such as Robert Lighthizer and Peter Navarro – while sidelining economic internationalists like Gary Cohn – the President successfully implemented a strategy aimed at under mining the WTO. His administration imposed large-scale tariffs, renegotiated or abandoned key trade agreements, and took direct action to cripple the dispute res olution mechanism of the WTO by blocking the appointment of new judges to the Appellate Body. This approach had tangible and lasting consequences, weakening the multilateral trade system in ways that aligned closely with Trump’s revisionist agenda. The case of the WTO thus demonstrates how a strategically composed ad visory system, free from internal resistance, allowed the President to pursue his objectives with minimal constraints.

Finally, the sixth chapter examined the Trump administration’s handling of the WHO during the COVID-19 crisis, showcasing yet another pattern of decision making. Initially, the WHO had remained at the periphery of Trump’s foreign pol icy concerns. However, with the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, the organisation quickly became a focal point of the administration’s rhetoric, particularly as part of its broader anti-China narrative. The chapter highlights how the advisory system in this case was fragmented and internally divided, with figures such as Anthony Fauci and Deborah Birx advocating for science-based responses, while others, in cluding Peter Navarro and Mike Pompeo, pushed for a more politicised approach. This internal discord created an environment in which Trump could use the WHO as a scapegoat, blaming it for the pandemic’s impact on the United States. The ad ministration’s decision to suspend US funding and eventually withdraw from the WHO was not the result of a coordinated strategy but rather of Trump’s ability to exploit divisions within his own advisory system, amplifying narratives that res onated with his political base.

Taken together, these three cases illustrate the theoretical model of this book: the outcomes of Trump’s foreign policy were not solely dictated by his personal preferences or ideological commitments, but rather by the interaction between his leadership style and the structure of his advisory system. Where strong institu tional constraints and cohesive opposition existed, as in the case of NATO, Trump’s ambitions were significantly curtailed. Where he was able to marginalise dissent ing voices and consolidate power among like-minded advisers, as in the case of the WTO, he was able to enact more radical changes. And where his inner circle was fragmented and disorganised, as in the case of the WHO, policy decisions were largely shaped by political opportunism rather than strategic intent.

A caveat is obviously needed. Theoretical models are required to shed light on a phenomenon, its causal mechanisms and determining factors, precisely because they have the ambition to explain, instead of offering a mere description of what is happening. Admittedly, by doing so, they overlook other variables that may have an impact on the observed phenomena. The end result is a well-known trade-off between theoretical parsimony and breadth of explanation. Aware of this dilem ma, we have endeavoured to concentrate on a strictly defined set of observations: on US policy towards International Organisations (IOs). We have also established specific scope conditions for our analysis, since our model applies only to presidential systems like the US.

Under these conditions, in our analysis, we have relied on two well-established strands of FPA: bureaucratic politics and leadership styles. As far as we know, they have rarely been used in an integrated manner, and the interaction between bureaucratic resistance and leaders’ personality traits is a field that remains, largely, to be developed. We believe that it is precisely this approach that offers one of the most promising avenues of research for investigating political figures such as Donald Trump: in an era of personalised politics (Pedersen and Rahat 2021), leaders like him are becoming increasingly common around the world. Whether they belong to authoritarian or democratic regimes, many share some of Trump’s traits. These leaders, in their capacity as charismatic, strong-willed, and determined figures, are known to clash with the established institutions and bureaucracies, which, in the main, tend to resist major revisionist changes. For this reason, while our analysis is limited to the American context, we believe it can shed some light on other cases, where leaders are driven by similarly disruptive foreign policy agendas (Kenne 2021; Wajner 2022; Pacciardi et al. 2024).

Moreover, as was highlighted in Chapter 3, one of our model’s strengths is its ability to explain the variance in policy results from two theoretical perspectives which, taken separately, tend to predict constant outcomes. Bureaucratic politics emphasises structural constraints that limit presidential autonomy, suggesting that policy outcomes should remain relatively stable regardless of the individual occupying the White House. Conversely, leadership style analyses focus on the President’s agency, portraying policy as a direct reflection of presidential style and individual preferences. When considered in isolation, each of these perspectives offers a rigid framework that fails to account for the fluid and often unpredictable nature of decision-making. When we look, instead, at how they interact, we derive the mechanisms through which Trump can be expected to achieve, or not, the goals inscribed in his political agenda. This also sheds light on the role of internal negotiations, strategic appointments, and the shifting balance of power within the advisory system. The extent to which Trump can impose his vision depends not only on his personal determination but also on the structure and cohesion of opposition within his own administration.

In other words, in the relationship with his close associates, the two configurations that we have illustrated (Presidential Predominance and Presidential Permissiveness) will remain the two poles between which the political process will also oscillate in the second Trump administration. The degree of presidential control over the advisory system will continue to be the key determinant in shaping policy outcomes. As we have seen throughout this volume, like previous Presidents, Donald Trump devised strategies to overcome opposition, both on the part of his cabinet and the broader administrative state. As concerns the former, differences between NATO, the WTO and WHO show how the President evolved during his first mandate. After the chaotic early days of the administration, he relied on the ‘Axis of Adults’, only to conclude the second half of the term surrounded by yes-men. In response, his opponents in the advisory system devised other counterstrategies to take advantage of his personality traits to thwart his revolutionary agenda, although their success depended on their capacity to form a united front.

If our model retains its explanatory value for interpreting the coming years of the Trump administration, it is because it is based on two variables that seem perhaps even more crucial today. Individual personality traits tend to remain relatively stable, and Donald Trump is no exception. He will not cease to be characterised by some of his most salient personality traits: low conceptual complexity, narcissism, a need for power and self-confidence, and a lack of persuasion. But there is a novelty in his second term, which is also captured by our model, that will have an impact on his foreign policy conduct: today, Trump has political experience that he did not have in 2017. While Trump’s lack of prior political experience was a defining feature of his leadership eight years ago, today he enters the White House with a comprehensive knowledge of policy processes and with substantial political experience.

As noted by Dombrowski (2024: 17) a few weeks after the elections, “Trump and his key advisers have learned from the false starts of 2017. […] Trump is likely to fill key cabinet and second-tier slots with loyalists, purge officials supportive of Biden administration policies and move quickly to take advantage of the election’s mandate”. Just a couple of months later, this prediction had proved correct. Although a certain degree of ambiguity in his leadership style will persist, as was the case during his first few years in office, it is to be expected that his greater experience will result in greater Presidential Predominance than Presidential Permissiveness. The first weeks of his second term seem to confirm this assertion – Trump meticulously assembled his national security team based on a strict standard of political loyalty: from MAGA supporters (as in the case of Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth) to ‘America First’ converts (like Mike Waltz, JD Vance, and Marco Rubio) (Harper 2025: 37), the current administration has left no room for internal dissent. So while differences and tensions may well arise within this group, the current cabinet presents a much more pronounced political-ideological homogeneity than was the case eight years ago.

Whether loyalty and ideological commonality will be enough to grant the President full command of the foreign policy process is hard to tell. At first glance, his bombastic statements on Greenland, Panama, Gaza, and Ukraine seem to show a President who is now free to indulge in his imperialist ambitions (Toft 2025). However, as we have seen before, this does not mean that the revolutionary agenda will meet no opposition. In the first place, as we have seen in chapter two, the literature on bureaucratic politics suggests that the set of agencies, institutions and organisations working with and for the President of the United States is, in any case, not to be regarded as impartial, apolitical, or merely technical in nature. The interaction between elected leaders and bureaucracy exposes both to reciprocal influence. Agencies and top institutional officials are able to exercise discretion, and they retain a certain amount of room for manoeuvre to pursue their goals.

Consistent with the tenets of the widely-circulated Mandate for Leadership (Dans and Groves 2024: 69–85), the administration’s early actions include a full-fledged war on the administrative state. Under the guidance of the newly-founded Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), several thousand federal employees are in the process of being fired, with a view to cutting workforce by 10 per cent in a few months (Campbell 2025). Unsurprisingly, this has already sparked legal action, with over 3,600 lawsuits filed in less than a month (Davies et al. 2025). In a nutshell, this tension shows how the President has learned the lessons of the past, and has escalated his attacks accordingly. But this does not mean that the bureaucrats won’t push back, as they have a plethora of administrative tools to resist the President (or Elon Musk, for that matter). So, despite a more homogeneous and loyal cabinet, Donald Trump can not fully escape bureaucratic politics in his second term in office.

#### It’s the consensus of every study of Trump.

Carati & Locatelli 25 [Andrea Carati, Associate Professor in Political Science and International Relations at the University of Milan, PhD Political Studies, University of Milan, Italy; and Andrea **Locatelli**, Associate Professor at the Catholic University in Milan, PhD Political Science, University of Florence, Italy; “Bureaucratic Politics and Leadership Style in the Trump Administration: An Overview,” Chapter 2, *Taming the President: Trump, the Advisory System, and the Mechanisms of US Foreign Policy Decision-Making*, De Gruyter, 8-22-2025, ISBN 9783111382852, p.36-39]

From a bureaucratic politics perspective, Trump’s foreign policy was mostly thwarted by administrative constraints. As the argument goes, organisational expertise, resources, control of information and bureaucrats’ ability to structure both policy formation and implementation impeded Trump’s fulfilling his revisionist agenda. In addition, it was rather easy for resilient, permanent agencies with a strong sense of purpose and identity (what scholars identify as organisational ‘essence’) to resist a President with scant knowledge of the policy process and negligible expertise in foreign affairs. The information gap, expertise, autonomy and ability to exercise discretion, limiting the range of available options and resisting change, all favoured bureaucracy against an erratic and unknowledgeable President.

To confirm this explanation there is, first of all, a vast assortment of anecdotal evidence (Leonnig and Rucker 2020; Woodward 2021; Wolff 2018, 2019). There are plenty of examples from the first Trump administration of political dynamics that corroborate the bureaucratic politics paradigm. For instance, in the yearly days of the presidency, the unpreparedness of Trump’s White House staff concerning foreign affairs – mainly due to the lack of a proper transition team for the President elect (King and Riddlesperger 2018) – allowed the establishment to select key figures for the top positions in the foreign policy machinery. That, in turn, let the foreign policy community defend the tradition of liberal internationalism (Carati and Locatelli 2023).

Another case in point is the defence of the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (KORUS) in the first months of the administration: the fierce resistance of Gary Cohn (Director of the National Economic Council (NEC) and Trump’s top economic adviser) and Rob Porter (Chief of Staff in the White House) made it possible for KORUS to survive despite Trump’s proposal to abandon the treaty (Woodward 2021). They took advantage of the information gap and the President’s apparent un familiarity with administrative procedures. Consequently, they succeeded in post poning the drafting of the letter intended for South Korean government. This was achieved by concealing the letter and exploiting the President’s demanding sched ule and short memory.

Similar organisational manoeuvring occurred during decision-making on a new strategy for Afghanistan during Trump’s first year in office. Throughout the electoral campaign and in the early months of 2017, Trump had been calling for disengagement from the Afghan quagmire. However, in the end, after a long and intricate policy process, in August he decided on a partial re-engagement with about 3,000 additional troops and a ‘condition-based’ approach for the withdrawal – that is, a sort of an open-ended commitment (Clarke and Ricketts 2017; Haar and Krebs 2021). Similarly to what Gary Cohn and Rob Porter did for the KORUS, the roles of Secretary of Defense James Mattis and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster in the strategy for Afghanistan proved to be pivotal in averting a premature withdrawal from the region and instead facilitating the reinstatement of US military engagement.

Even during the preparation of the most important public document for every US President’s foreign policy, the National Security Strategy (NSS), Trump was not in full control of the process. The Pentagon’s organisational essence, its know-how, time and knowledge allowed the defence agencies to have the final word on the text. The NSS (2017) adopted by Trump was a rather ordinary strategy, confirming all the key elements of American liberal hegemony (Weaver 2018). Trump missed the opportunity to set a revisionist strategic posture because the process was mostly controlled by the defence bureaucracy. The result was that “the anti-globalist rhetoric permeated the short introduction (signed by the President), but the full length document (prepared by bureaucratic staff ) was a manifesto of liberal internationalism” (Carati and Locatelli 2023: 98).

The entire first term of Trump’s presidency confirmed his inability to be fully in control of policymaking (Herbert et al. 2019). Bureaucratic impediments were part of that inability – not only at the start, due to his need to familiarise himself with a new institutional environment – but also afterwards. Indeed, in the beginning of 2019, Trump seemed to carve out greater room to manoeuvre vis-à-vis the establishment. As Martha Cottam (2021) noted, there were some differences between the first and final two years in terms of constraints on the President. Some decisions revealed that change, the most indicative being the unexpected US withdrawal from Syria and eventual disengagement from Afghanistan (accompanied by negotiations with the Taliban). Trump appeared less inhibited by bureaucracy: “the bulk of his most competent and least sycophantic advisers have now left the administration” (Ragget and Shapiro 2019) and he got rid “of most of the advisers who reportedly tried to constrain his impulses” (Dale 2019). Any way, even though the bureaucratic grip on Trump seemed partially diminished, it did not disappear, and his political control over foreign policy making remained feeble and inconsistent (Wolff 2021).

Beyond the more anecdotical literature on Trump policymaking – which offers, despite its descriptive character, a broad picture of what happened in the White House, confirming the bureaucratic politics paradigm – several contributions in the field of FPA present more structured analyses. In one of the most systematic investigations of the Trump administration, Jon Herbert, Trevor McCrisken and Andrew Wroe (2019: 8) found that the first answer to the question of what led from an extraordinary President to a rather ordinary presidency is the American political system in itself: “the Founding Fathers designed a system to constrain ambitious and potentially dangerous leaders”. Even beyond constitutional constraints, every President meets a thick and sticky administrative environment of entrenched interests, agencies and lobbies. In their efforts to lead and govern, US Presidents need rare and effective political skills to achieve results and “these skills […] amount primarily to the president’s ability to bargain with and persuade other office holders” (Herbert et al. 2019: 9).

Trump, according to the three authors, lacked that ability and suffered from bureaucratic constraints. To make matters worse, in his first term, Trump did not have the opportunity for action offered by crises, in which political power usually flows to the centre. He governed during a moderately quiet period for international politics – e. g., nothing comparable to a major war, the 9/11 terrorist attack, a large NATO intervention or Russian aggression against Ukraine occurred in his first four years in office. The authors concluded that the populist motto of ‘draining the swamp’ in Washington failed miserably because of Trump’s ignorance of policy, his lack of success in controlling political processes in the White House, and erratic presidential dealings with departments and Congress. In the end, his anti-establishment rhetoric manifested itself in recurring, disrespectful statements about institutions but did not turn into tangible presidential influence over bureaucracy.

In a similar vein, Daniel Drezner (2019) argues that, although Trump succeeded in challenging liberal internationalism both in public and within the US foreign policy establishment, he failed to establish a new, anti-globalist and neo-isolationist approach. Overall, he could not embed his “foreign policy ideas into new or existing foreign policy institutions” (Drezner 2019: 723). More specifically, under Trump, presidential influence over entrenched organisational interests was ephemeral or absent: Trump, unlike his predecessors, did not create new agencies or offices to bypass the policy status quo imposed by existing institutions and advance his own ideas. Beyond polemic skirmishes, Trump made no real institutional effort to challenge that status quo: he did not push Congress or key administrative branches to enshrine foreign policy in the direction of his choosing. Even his efforts to build on, or connect with, alternative or conservative think tanks committed to his foreign policy agenda proved to be short-lived, devoid of a plan or direction. So, Drezner (2019: 726) concludes, “the evidence suggests that [Trump’s] efforts to embed populist foreign policy ideas into foreign policy and national security bureaucracies largely failed”.

Investigating the interplay between Trump and the ‘deep state’, Robert Horowitz (2021) argues that at the end of his presidency, Trump portrayed himself as having been subverted by a “shadowy network of unelected bureaucrats that illegitimately holds the levers of real power in the United States” (Horowitz 2021: 473). In other words, his foreign policy agenda underachieved because hidden elements within the federal bureaucracy sabotaged his political initiatives. While there is a strong populist component to the accusation, mainly based on an overstatement of the power of the American deep state, beyond conspiracy theories, Trump was revealing something true about the bureaucratic difficulties he experienced in the White House. Horowitz’s focus in his article is on a flawed understanding of the term ‘deep state’ in Trump’s narrative and how dangerous it is for American democracy. Nonetheless, his analysis is also telling from a bureaucratic politics perspective, where it shed light on the role of agencies, the intelligence community, Congress and the foreign policy apparatus within the administration.

Other scholars investigated the relationship between Trump and top officials and advisers (Bergen 2019; Carati and Locatelli 2023; Cottam 2021; Da Vinha 2019; Haar and Krebs 2021; Schmidt 2020). All these contributions, one way or another, demonstrate that the relationship between the President and cabinet secretaries, agency heads and policy entrepreneurs was mismanaged. As we will examine at greater length in the second part of the book, the empirical evidence largely confirms that, in his first four years in office, Trump was not in full control of administrative procedures: officials, advisers and agency representatives were able to reframe the direction and decision-making agenda concerning foreign policy. There is a broad consensus that in the first half of the presidency, key top officials challenged, shaped and constrained Trump’s foreign policy making. What was called the ‘Axis of Adults’ (Bergen 2019: 362) – including, among others, Secretary of De fence James Mattis, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, National Security Advisor Her bert McMaster, Chief of Staff John Kelly, and Director of the National Economic Council Gary Cohn – was able to keep US foreign policy firmly within liberal inter nationalism. Taking advantage of the President’s ignorance regarding policy and lack of familiarity with defence and security issues, they eventually won the battle within the administration against anti-globalist representatives, led by chief strategist Steve Bannon (Haar and Krebs 2021). But even after he had gotten rid of all of the ‘adults’ by early 2019, the administration remained chaotic (Carati and Locatelli 2023; Cottam 2021): Trump did not replace the ‘Axis of Adults’ with experts at the same level; what he gained in terms of loyalty he lost in terms of efficiency.

### 1AC---BACK TO THE ADVANTAGE

\*if certainly have enough time (as I suspect), move under bioterror impact and delete “bioterror” from the beginning of the tag

#### Bioterror defense is scientifically false---especially if Russia sponsors.

Millett & Snyder-Beattie 17 [Piers Millett, PhD, Senior Research Fellow, Future of Humanity Institute, University of Oxford; and Andrew Snyder-Beattie, MS, Director of Research, Future of Humanity Institute, University of Oxford; “Existential Risk and Cost-Effective Biosecurity,” Health Security, 15(4), 8-1-2017, PubMed]

In the decades to come, advanced bioweapons could threaten human existence. Although the probability of human extinction from bioweapons may be low, the expected value of reducing the risk could still be large, since such risks jeopardize the existence of all future generations. We provide an overview of biotechnological extinction risk, make some rough initial estimates for how severe the risks might be, and compare the cost-effectiveness of reducing these extinction-level risks with existing biosecurity work. We find that reducing human extinction risk can be more cost-effective than reducing smaller-scale risks, even when using conservative estimates. This suggests that the risks are not low enough to ignore and that more ought to be done to prevent the worst-case scenarios. How worthwhile is it spending resources to study and mitigate the chance of human extinction from biological risks? The risks of such a catastrophe are presumably low, so a skeptic might argue that addressing such risks would be a waste of scarce resources. In this article, we investigate this position using a cost-effectiveness approach and ultimately conclude that the expected value of reducing these risks is large, especially since such risks jeopardize the existence of all future human lives. Historically, disease events have been responsible for the greatest death tolls on humanity. The 1918 flu was responsible for more than 50 million deaths,1 while smallpox killed perhaps 10 times that many in the 20th century alone.2 The Black Death was responsible for killing over 25% of the European population,3 while other pandemics, such as the plague of Justinian, are thought to have killed 25 million in the 6th century—constituting over 10% of the world's population at the time.4 It is an open question whether a future pandemic could result in outright human extinction or the irreversible collapse of civilization. A skeptic would have many good reasons to think that existential risk from disease is unlikely. Such a disease would need to spread worldwide to remote populations, overcome rare genetic resistances, and evade detection, cures, and countermeasures. Even evolution itself may work in humanity's favor: Virulence and transmission is often a trade-off, and so evolutionary pressures could push against maximally lethal wild-type pathogens.5,6 While these arguments point to a very small risk of human extinction, they do not rule the possibility out entirely. Although rare, there are recorded instances of species going extinct due to disease—primarily in amphibians, but also in 1 mammalian species of rat on Christmas Island.7,8 There are also historical examples of large human populations being almost entirely wiped out by disease, especially when multiple diseases were simultaneously introduced into a population without immunity. The most striking examples of total population collapse include native American tribes exposed to European diseases, such as the Massachusett (86% loss of population), Quiripi-Unquachog (95% loss of population), and the Western Abenaki (which suffered a staggering 98% loss of population).9 In the modern context, no single disease currently exists that combines the worst-case levels of transmissibility, lethality, resistance to countermeasures, and global reach. But many diseases are proof of principle that each worst-case attribute can be realized independently. For example, some diseases exhibit nearly a 100% case fatality ratio in the absence of treatment, such as rabies or septicemic plague. Other diseases have a track record of spreading to virtually every human community worldwide, such as the 1918 flu,10 and seroprevalence studies indicate that other pathogens, such as chickenpox and HSV-1, can successfully reach over 95% of a population.11,12 Under optimal virulence theory, natural evolution would be an unlikely source for pathogens with the highest possible levels of transmissibility, virulence, and global reach. But advances in biotechnology might allow the creation of diseases that combine such traits. Recent controversy has already emerged over a number of scientific experiments that resulted in viruses with enhanced transmissibility, lethality, and/or the ability to overcome therapeutics.13-17 Other experiments demonstrated that mousepox could be modified to have a 100% case fatality rate and render a vaccine ineffective.18 In addition to transmissibility and lethality, studies have shown that other disease traits, such as incubation time, environmental survival, and available vectors, could be modified as well.19-21 Although these experiments had scientific merit and were not conducted with malicious intent, their implications are still worrying. This is especially true given that there is also a long historical track record of state-run bioweapon research applying cutting-edge science and technology to design agents not previously seen in nature. The Soviet bioweapons program developed agents with traits such as enhanced virulence, resistance to therapies, greater environmental resilience, increased difficulty to diagnose or treat, and which caused unexpected disease presentations and outcomes.22 Delivery capabilities have also been subject to the cutting edge of technical development, with Canadian, US, and UK bioweapon efforts playing a critical role in developing the discipline of aerobiology.23,24 While there is no evidence of state-run bioweapons programs directly attempting to develop or deploy bioweapons that would pose an existential risk, the logic of deterrence and mutually assured destruction could create such incentives in more unstable political environments or following a breakdown of the Biological Weapons Convention.25 The possibility of a war between great powers could also increase the pressure to use such weapons—during the World Wars, bioweapons were used across multiple continents, with Germany targeting animals in WWI,26 and Japan using plague to cause an epidemic in China during WWII.27 Non-state actors may also pose a risk, especially those with explicitly omnicidal aims. While rare, there are examples. The Aum Shinrikyo cult in Japan sought biological weapons for the express purpose of causing extinction.28 Environmental groups, such as the Gaia Liberation Front, have argued that “we can ensure Gaia's survival only through the extinction of the Humans as a species … we now have the specific technology for doing the job … several different [genetically engineered] viruses could be released”(quoted in ref. 29). Groups such as R.I.S.E. also sought to protect nature by destroying most of humanity with bioweapons.30 Fortunately, to date, non-state actors have lacked the capabilities needed to pose a catastrophic bioweapons threat, but this could change in future decades as biotechnology becomes more accessible and the pool of experienced users grows.31,32 What is the appropriate response to these speculative extinction threats? A balanced biosecurity portfolio might include investments that reduce a mix of proven and speculative risks, but striking this balance is still difficult given the massive uncertainties around the low-probability, high-consequence risks. In this article, we examine the traditional spectrum of biosecurity risks (ie, biocrimes, bioterrorism, and biowarfare) to categorize biothreats by likelihood and impact, expanding the historical analysis to consider even lower-probability, higher-consequence events (catastrophic risks and existential risks). In order to produce reasoned estimates of the likelihood of different categories of biothreats, we bring together relevant data and theory and produce some first-guess estimates of the likelihood of different categories of biothreat, and we use these initial estimates to compare the cost-effectiveness of reducing existential risks with more traditional biosecurity measures. We emphasize that these models are highly uncertain, and their utility lies more in enabling order-of-magnitude comparisons rather than as a precise measure of the true risk. However, even with the most conservative models, we find that reduction of low-probability, high-consequence risks can be more cost-effective, as measured by quality-adjusted life year per dollar, especially when we account for the lives of future generations. This suggests that despite the low probability of such events, society still ought to invest more in preventing the most extreme possible biosecurity catastrophes.