

Issue brief A pivot to China—not Asia

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The next National Defense Strategy must prioritize competition with China beyond the Indo-Pacific—and clearly define how to recalibrate the size, structure, and posture of US forces.

Bottom lines up front

- To deter China in the Indo-Pacific, the US military should focus on long-range fires, the ability to move forces, and infrastructure protection. It should strengthen its posture through additional basing options and capacity building.
- The Department of Defense (DoD) should recognize the global implications of competition and conflict with China—and should adapt US force structure and posture accordingly.
- The United States should deprioritize secondary regions but not divest from them entirely, articulating which resources and capabilities it will provide, and where allies and partners should take the lead.

How to counter China in the Indo-Pacific and beyond

The National Defense Strategy (NDS) of the second Donald Trump administration is likely to prioritize China as the primary competitor of the United States. This is a marked change from the NDS of the first Trump administration and that of the Joe Biden administration. Both administrations centered great-power competition in Department of Defense (DoD) strategy, weighing China and Russia—and therefore the Indo-Pacific and Europe—as twin focal points of risk and strategic interest.

The current Trump administration is shifting gears. Rather than balancing China and Russia, the DoD will now organize around China as the principal threat and competitor (prioritizing it alongside homeland defense). Until and unless these two top priorities are met, everything else must be deprioritized.

Prioritization is welcome. To the ire of defense planners, the United States has long attempted to prioritize too much in its NDS. In their view, the strategy attempts to balance too many regions and too many threats to the United States without a corresponding increase in defense budget, making it difficult to address any of them effectively. The problem is not whether the United States should engage globally—it must—but whether considering too many issues means that none of them is truly prioritized. A case in point: The Barack Obama administration's promised pivot to Asia never fully materialized.

There also exists a belief that China has been able to outpace the United States in many key areas. While China has focused on increasing its national power to compete with the United States, US administrations have balanced many other threats—including Russia in Europe, Iran and terrorist or-

ganizations in the Middle East and globally, and North Korea—diverting focus from the China threat.

Those writing the NDS—most notably, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby—are set to rectify this issue, ensuring that China and the Indo-Pacific receive the focus they deserve. This is seen as a natural rebalance after decades of focus on regions that can, and should, better defend themselves. However, a sober assessment of available resources suggests that this focus will come at the expense of other issues and regions.

This issue brief outlines how the Trump administration—through its upcoming NDS—can effectively and successfully conceive of China as the primary threat, while rebalancing in other regions in a measured and responsible way. It argues that a strategy focused on China requires the US military's force structure (i.e., the size and organization of its forces) and its force posture (i.e., where its forces are positioned globally) to be more focused on the Indo-Pacific. Force structure adjustments should prioritize long-range fires, the ability to move forces, and infrastructure protection. Force posture adjustments should focus on exploring additional basing options and capacity building with allies and partners.

At the same time, the DoD must ensure that it pivots not to Asia, but to China—prioritizing competition with China on a global scale, not just in the Indo-Pacific. As China competes globally, the United States must adopt a similarly global approach to remain competitive.

Finally, force posture changes in traditionally prioritized regions like Europe and the Middle East should be executed carefully, as those theaters remain vital to US security and economic interests. The DoD should put in place a robust plan to empower allies and partners to assume greater responsibility.

Combat power, defensive capabilities, and nuclear deterrence

A China-focused approach to US defense strategy requires a force that can deter and, if necessary, win a major-power war in the Indo-Pacific, the most likely conflict theater. The US military needs the size and organization to solve three overarching problems it faces in the Indo-Pacific: bringing significant combat power to bear at long range, given the geography of the theater; moving and sustaining forces across the globe; and protecting bases and lines of communication. This logic rests on a credible nuclear deterrent, encompassing theater and strategic nuclear forces and missile defenses, since confrontation between two nuclear powers inherently carries the risk of escalation to nuclear conflict.

The first problem necessitates the ability for the United States to detect, engage, and assess a wide range of targets across the vast geographic area of the Indo-Pacific. This requires investing heavily in persistent, survivable overhead systems, including intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), as well as communications assets. Engagement mandates a combination of significant investment in long-range weapons and launch platforms, including highly survivable penetrating assets like B-21 bombers and *Virginia*-class submarines. One advantage of focusing on these capabilities is the ease of shifting these forces to another theater, such as Europe or the Middle East, in the event of a crisis—assuming they are not actively engaged in the Indo-Pacific. These high-end platforms should be balanced with a mixture of low-end capabilities—mostly unmanned or attritable vehicles across all domains, especially air, sea, surface, and subsurface. Finally, assets that extend range, such as air refuelers and oilers, are essential.

The second challenge is to ensure the ability for the United States to sustain and support its forces across vast distances. An Indo-Pacific conflict will require significant US military force projection and sustainment. Even with more forces and equipment deployed in the region, the tyranny of distance, limited infrastructure, and the nature of a highly contested and degraded operational environment make force projection and sustainment imperative. The sustainment problem—including materiel generation, logistics, stockpiling, and transportation—must be addressed strategically and proactively by investing in the US defense industrial base, building redundancy in supply chains, and laying the foundation for large-scale mobilization and surge capacity in the event of a major-power war. Moving and sustaining the force between and across large theaters like the Indo-Pacific requires robust lift capabilities, especially sealift and strategic airlift assets, as well as enablers such as aerial refueling tankers and undersea platforms. Tactical mobility and sustainment likewise require major and sustained investment. Most of the military services are considering innovative, tactical solutions, including autonomous lift vehicles and uncrewed resupply platforms, but greater emphasis is needed to ensure persistent logistical support under fire—particularly in a distributed and denied battlespace like the Indo-Pacific.

Finally, US bases and supply lines must be protected from ever-expanding threats. Bases are where the military generates combat power to defeat the enemy; supply lines sustain those bases and allow the forces to continue fighting. As China fields a growing inventory of missiles, autonomous vehicles, and cyber capabilities, the DoD must ensure that US bases continue to generate combat power and that supplies continue to flow despite kinetic and non-kinetic attacks ran-

ging from the continental United States to island bases and everywhere in between.¹

The United States should strive to protect its forces by preventing Chinese targeting efforts, defeating weapons after launch, and limiting the damage dealt by those weapons that survive US defenses. To accomplish this, the US military should invest in non-kinetic capabilities to neutralize Chinese detection and command-and-control capabilities. Active defenses such as missile defenses and counter-small, unmanned aerial systems capabilities are essential. Finally, the United States can lessen the destructiveness of Chinese strikes by improving survivability—for example, through enhanced dispersion and the hardening of key military and civilian infrastructure.

Paying for this force structure without dramatically increasing defense expenditure requires deprioritizing force structure in other capability areas. The United States should shift resources away from capabilities that do not meaningfully contribute to the problems described above. This includes heavy ground formations such as armored brigades, large surface warships, and short-range, runway-dependent fighter aircraft. The DoD should also seriously examine the necessary size of the US aircraft carrier force, as the competitive advantages of these assets might no longer justify the current size of the fleet.

What a China focus means for US force posture

Force posture is the other area in which the DoD will need to make the most rapid changes to align with the new China-driven strategic direction. Relocating US forces is a time-intensive and complex logistical effort, requiring host nation agreements and possibly the construction of new infrastructure. The next NDS, using analysis from the ongoing force posture review, should provide clear direction on which capabilities to posture where, including which forces to shift or withdraw from deprioritized theaters.

The prime deterrent to Chinese aggression is the presence of US military forces in the Western Pacific. The United States should bolster its posture in the island chains by pursuing permanent basing options in the Philippines and continuing to build capacity in Australia, Japan, and the Mariana Islands. The DoD should deliberately posture those forces deemed “stand-in” forces, such as Marine Littoral Regiments, in the Philippines and Japanese islands, while “stand-off” forces like bombers

and the Army’s Dark Eagle battalions should be postured in the farther islands. Relocating stand-in forces from the First Island Chain (composed of the Kuril Islands, the Japanese archipelago, the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, the northern Philippines, and Borneo) to the Second Island Chain (formed by Japan’s Bonin Islands and Volcano Islands, in addition to the Mariana Islands, the western Caroline Islands, and extending to Western New Guinea) is a mistake—such forces neither deter nor defeat China if they are postured far out of range. Amphibious forces, though postured throughout the Indo-Pacific, remain important as means to re-enter the Western Pacific if and when Chinese anti-access and area denial systems are neutralized.

A more China-focused approach in the Indo-Pacific also requires the DoD to balance its resources to address other challenges in the Indo-Pacific—most notably, the threat from North Korea. In a war between the United States and China, there is a real risk of simultaneous conflict with North Korea. US strategy often treats potential conflicts with China or North Korea as separate, but a crisis with one could trigger horizontal escalation with the other—whether through misperception or because one side seeks to exploit the crisis to advance its own interests. As Markus Garlauskas, director of the Indo-Pacific Security Initiative of the Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, has highlighted, the risk of simultaneity is significant.² One example: In a conflict with China, Washington might seek to employ resources based on the Korean Peninsula, potentially provoking Chinese attacks on the Republic of Korea, or even prompting Beijing inducing Pyongyang to join the war in a horizontal escalation. In this context, the DoD must evaluate how to balance increasing the share of the burden that allies like South Korea bear in their own defense with the benefit of reinforcing US forces on the peninsula to deter or defeat a combined China-North Korea offensive, which may be more likely than planners have previously considered.

Overall, the DoD must weigh the extent to which US forces in the Indo-Pacific will be dual-tasked and prepared to address both China and North Korea—possibly at the same time if conflict with China escalates horizontally—or to what extent prioritizing China means deprioritizing North Korea as a strategic threat. In the latter case, the DoD must both outline the level of strategic risk it is willing to accept and identify which allied or partner nations could assume greater responsibility for addressing a North Korean threat.

1. Office of the Secretary of Defense. “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China.” In *Annual Report to Congress*. 2021.
2. Markus Garlauskas, “The United States and its allies must be ready to deter a two-front war and nuclear attacks in East Asia,” Atlantic Council, August 16, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-united-states-and-its-allies-must-be-ready-to-deter-a-two-front-war-and-nuclear-attacks-in-east-asia/>.

Finally, the administration should articulate how it will balance its focus on China with its other priority area—homeland defense. The DoD should ensure that existing homeland defense capabilities, especially air- and missile-defense assets like the Ground-Based Interceptor and fighter units, such as Air National Guard units, are resourced to fulfill their missions without detracting from readiness for power projection, particularly in the Indo-Pacific.

An effective China strategy must be global, not regional

The DoD must posture itself around the reality that competition with China is taking place not only in the Indo-Pacific but globally, and that any potential war with China will almost certainly become a global war. An NDS that focuses on China only in the Indo-Pacific context would be a strategic mistake, because China is competing with the United States in other regions and China's strategic investments in footholds spanning Latin America, Africa, Eurasia, and Europe will increase its ability to project force closer to the Western Hemisphere, further complicating the United States' force access and maneuverability in its own backyard. China's investments across Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe—in deep-sea ports, space infrastructure, and critical mineral mining sites—all have military implications for the United States.³ They give China information, placement, and access that afford it more global reach and can be used to disrupt US capabilities and plans in regions where the United States is used to maneuvering uncontested. China is especially likely to utilize these global capabilities in the event of conflict in the Indo-Pacific, seeking to entangle the United States in other theaters and distract its capabilities and forces from the conflict area. China approaches competition with the United States globally, and the United States should view its competition with China in the same way. As such, the NDS would be smart to conceive of its China prioritization as a pivot to China rather than a pivot to Asia.

To achieve this, the DoD needs a strategy for China that is truly global in nature. While the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) is presumably the coordinating authority for the global campaign plan for China, each combatant commander has

issues they are trying to solve—matching resources to tasks across the globe cannot be resolved by a single geographic combatant commander.⁴ This siloed approach can fundamentally hamper the effective execution of global campaign plans that span authorities and lack clear lines of ownership. While the expertise and focus that reside within INDOPACOM are essential to creating a coherent strategy, more centralized leadership and management of a global campaign will yield more positive outcomes.

This NDS has a unique opportunity to address some of the challenges that exist across seams of responsibility, and to put forward a bold strategy to deter and counter China where it strategically matters to the United States globally, clearly defining the role that all combatant commands will play in deterrence and warfighting. While the Unified Command Plan defines the combatant command structure, the NDS can help keep the vast military apparatus focused by addressing this issue when describing regional objectives and strategies.

Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa are important regions for a China-focused defense strategy, although they do not warrant large conventional force postures. They are valuable markets for US commerce and supply chains and are increasingly competitive arenas between the United States and China. While the administration is considering a reorganization of the combatant commands—and while the prospect of consolidating geographic commands might make sense on paper—even large staffs can only track and deal with so many problems.⁵ Commands like US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) and US Africa Command (AFRICOM), though comparatively lean in staff and resources, play a critical role in managing regional risks that could otherwise divert attention or resources to higher-priority theaters. By focusing on the unique challenges within their areas of responsibility, these commands contribute to the DoD's global campaign plan for China by managing instability and malign influence in the Western Hemisphere and Africa and keeping them from undermining US security, strategic access, or force projection elsewhere. In this context, it is immensely valuable for the DoD to maintain commands with clearly defined regional responsibilities—avoiding areas of responsibility so large that they dilute the ability to manage competition and risk effectively.

3. Claudio Bozzi, "China Has Invested Billions in Ports around the World. This Is Why the West Is so concerned.," *The Conversation*, January 23, 2025, <https://theconversation.com/china-has-invested-billions-in-ports-around-the-world-this-is-why-the-west-is-so-concerned-244733>; Diana Roy, "China's Growing Influence in Latin America," *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 6, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-influence-latin-america-argentina-brazil-venezuela-security-energy-bri>.
4. "US Has a Global Campaign Plan for China: Pentagon," *Economic Times*, April 18, 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/us-has-a-global-campaign-plan-for-china-pentagon/articleshow/63743972.cms>.
5. Aaron Ross, "US Weighing Future of Military Command in Africa, Top General Says," *Reuters*, May 27, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/us-weighing-future-military-command-africa-top-general-says-2025-05-27/>.

Additionally, the DoD should outline the role functional combatant commands such as US Cyber Command (CYBERCOM) and US Special Operations Command (SOCOM) can play in managing long-term competition with China, particularly in theaters and domains that are less prioritized by the rest of the conventional Joint Force. For example, US Special Operations Forces (SOF) are uniquely positioned to operate below the threshold of armed conflict, employing cost-effective methods to complicate, deter, or counter China's strategic objectives—especially in regions where the DoD will not sustain a significant conventional presence. These forces offer versatile capabilities, whether by advising allies and partners, conducting limited direct action against emergent threats, contributing to intelligence gathering on global Chinese activities, or countering Chinese influence campaigns through irregular means. By deliberately posturing special operations forces in less prioritized or contested regions, the DoD can generate strategic effects that help reinforce US interests and blunt the global ambitions of competitors like China—delivering high value at relatively low cost.⁶

To prioritize China, the DoD should also pursue a pivot to China rather than a pivot to Asia, developing a global strategy to defeat a global adversary while maintaining most of its military power in the Indo-Pacific for a fight against the People's Liberation Army.

Deprioritizing Europe and the Middle East without taking unacceptable risk

If the current administration decides to focus more of its force structure and posture on a Chinese threat, it should clearly articulate how this will impact its posture vis-à-vis previously prioritized threats. This includes clarifying to what extent it will deprioritize Europe and the Middle East—traditionally regions with significant US military commitments—as well as how precisely it will do so, and where and how it is willing to take risks.

Strategic prioritization is about resource allocation. Resourcing includes financial appropriations and, in a military sense, force management. The US military should be structured and postured to achieve the strategic goals set out by the NDS. The administration's new priorities—deterring China and defending the homeland—should receive as many resources as possible to provide the best possible odds of success. Lower priorities should receive fewer resources.

A strategy that responsibly prioritizes one major competitor above others must clearly articulate where and how it plans to do less, while putting plans in place for the roles and capabilities it formerly provided to be taken over by others. Below is an outline for how to do this.

In Europe, the United States should continue to provide the capability—not the mass—to support allies in deterring Russia. It should consider removing ground combat forces (although permanently stationing an armored brigade in Poland would considerably enhance the security situation in Eastern Europe at relatively low cost). The United States should also consider removing some of its fighter strength from Europe. Conventional ground forces and tactical fighters are areas in which European countries can, and should, bear more of the burden. However, few European countries can match the United States in terms of joint command and control (C2), ISR, and logistics.

At present, only US extended deterrence can credibly deter Russia from nuclear attack against Europe. At the same time, preventing nuclear proliferation remains a fundamental tenet of US grand strategy and one that would be at risk should US allies in Europe lose confidence in the US nuclear umbrella. Combined, these factors suggest that the US military should not focus on providing the bulk of combat forces in Europe but should provide those niche and exquisite capabilities that the United States has spent decades refining, allowing Europe to focus on the major “blocking and tackling” of military operations. The new NDS should outline these decisions and provide clarity to US allies in Europe.

In the Middle East, the US goal should be to curb the Iranian threat by bolstering both Arab and Israeli allies and partners. In this theater, the US military should be postured to help protect allies and partners from Iranian long-range strikes and ensure sea lines of communication remain open despite actions by Iranian-aligned groups. For those purposes, the United States should maintain capabilities similar to those in Europe, but smaller and more focused on air and missile defense. The US military should continue to play a key role as the C2 integrator for the region and provide sufficient forces, especially air defense and fourth-generation fighter aircraft that are less useful in the Indo-Pacific, to protect critical positions such as bases, population centers, and energy infrastructure. However, the United States should minimize ground and naval forces to the minimum practical extent—and it should avoid sending more valuable air assets, such as fifth-generation fighters, to the region.

6. Clementine Starling-Daniels and Theresa Luetkefend, “The Next Decade of Strategic Competition: How the Pentagon Can Use Special Operations Forces to Better Compete,” Atlantic Council, January 14, 2025, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-next-decade-of-strategic-competition-how-the-pentagon-can-use-special-operations-forces-to-better-compete/>.

The administration should also recognize that China's strategy is increasingly reinforced by its deepening relationships with other US competitors—namely Russia, North Korea, and Iran—all of whom are working more closely together to advance shared interests and undermine US influence. Therefore, a China-focused defense strategy must take a clear-eyed view of how managing competition with these actors—whether by the United States or through allies and partners—can directly shape Beijing's strategic calculus. Issues, capabilities, or plans associated with these competitors, particularly where they enable or amplify China's objectives, should be considered within the DoD's prioritization framework. At a minimum, the DoD should systematically map which allies, partners, or other US departments and agencies are taking the lead on these actors and assess how those efforts intersect with or support the DoD's priorities related to long-term competition with China.

Conclusion

As the DoD rebalances the weight of US forces to address the priority challenge of China, it should do so with the understanding that China is a global competitor, not just a regional one. While the DoD should consider force posture and structure adjustments in the Indo-Pacific, Beijing's strategic ambitions and footholds extend well beyond the region, requiring the DoD to adopt a global lens in assessing risk, posturing forces, and employing tools of deterrence and influence. At the same time, any shift in force posture away from traditionally prioritized regions like Europe and the Middle East must be executed with strategic foresight and care. These regions remain vital to US security and economic interests, and any reduction in US presence must be accompanied by robust plans to empower allies and partners to assume greater responsibility for regional security and deterrence, while ensuring that no adversary is allowed to fill the vacuum. The DoD's forthcoming NDS offers a critical opportunity to align ends, ways, and means to ensure that strategic priorities are matched by resourcing decisions across military services and commands. A truly executable defense strategy must not only clarify what matters most but also chart a viable path for achieving it in a world defined by interlinked threats and finite resources.

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