

Policy Solutions

Bolster U.S. Military (Mark Montgomery)

As a new administration is poised to take charge in January 2025, it will face a markedly different threat landscape than its predecessor. The United States and its allies now confront an axis of authoritarians in China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea that have deepened their cooperation and are challenging the United States and its partners in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. While the trend line is working against democracies, there is much the incoming administration can do to improve U.S. military capabilities to deter and, if necessary, defeat potential threats.

First and foremost, Washington must invest in defense capabilities. It is hard to compete with one near-peer adversary, much less two, with declining investments. Defense spending as a percentage of GDP dropped from 4.5% to 3.1% under President Barack Obama, then rose back to 3.5% under President Donald Trump, only to fall back to 3.1% by 2024 under President Biden. The next administration should increase the defense budget to 3.5% of GDP. Non-defense domestic spending should not be tied to this sum. With proper defense spending levels, the United States can focus on a number of specific warfighting areas.

The first priority should be improving missile defense capability and capacity. Russian cruise and ballistic missile attacks have decimated Ukrainian critical infrastructure. The war has laid bare the significant air defense capacity required to deter these strikes. While the United States has both sea-based and land-based ballistic missile defense capabilities and has sufficient sea-based cruise missile defense capacity, U.S. forces have significant gaps in protecting against land-attack cruise and ballistic missiles and against all forms of hypersonic missile threats. The U.S. Army has failed to develop a follow-on mid-range air defense system to replace the “Hawk” systems, which were retired nearly 30 years ago. Consequently, U.S. airfields, prepositioned equipment, ports, and other logistics sites are insufficiently protected against cruise missile threats.

The development of U.S. offensive hypersonic capabilities is starting to pace those of China and Russia. However, the development of U.S. hypersonic defensive countermeasures lags behind Beijing's and Moscow's offensive efforts. The Missile Defense Agency is still in the early stages of developing defensive hypersonic defense systems and will need to be both aggressive and lucky to pace Chinese and Russian offensive capability development. It would be especially worrisome and destabilizing if a "first-mover" authoritarian state were to develop significant offensive hypersonic capability before the United States and its allies had hypersonic defense capabilities. Concerningly, Washington spends nearly 10 times more on offensive hypersonic systems than it does on defensive hypersonic systems each year.

The Defense Department should also assess the need for medium- and high-altitude persistent aerostats (dirigibles and balloons) with installed air defense radars for the defense of both forward-deployed forces and the homeland. These systems improve raid detection ranges and accuracy while allowing for more cost-efficient engagements of inbound missile threats.

The United States previously excelled in these technologies but has been slow to exploit them. [CF3]

A second area of investment should be in expanding U.S. strike capabilities. Wargames consistently demonstrate that the ability of U.S. forces to strike the adversary with long-range precision weapons launched from the air, ground, and sea is the chief factor in both winning the conflict and reducing U.S. casualties. If the United States must rely on shorter-range (i.e., less than 300 nautical miles) strike weapons, both its casualty rates and risk of tactical defeat will rise. [MCM4] The United States and its allies will need a significant qualitative advantage to offset China or Russia's geographic proximity to the battlespace. Specific programs that can provide this advantage include the Army's PrSM systems, Navy and Air Force Long Range Anti-ship Cruise missiles, and JASSM-ER missiles. But these expensive systems should be paired with less expensive, less sophisticated systems, such as Powered JDAM and kamikaze drones, to complicate enemy surveillance and lower the cost of victory.

Both of these offensive and defensive mission sets will need to leverage a third investment area, buying munitions and maintaining the Arsenal of Democracy.

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine exposed a massive hole in U.S. and NATO military spending and production on munitions over the past three decades. Congress and the Biden administration have made a three-year effort to restore U.S. munition stocks by buying many munitions at 100% of current production capacity and investing in increasing production capacity. This funding needs to continue for the foreseeable future. It should include investments in munitions production, multi-year buys of more expensive systems, and co-production at allied facilities in Europe and Asia.

In addition to these investments, there are specific policy issues that can enhance U.S. and allied deterrence and war-winning capabilities. The United States must continue to support Ukraine. Further supplemental assistance bills will be required. Previous supplementals equated to only around 2.5% of annual U.S. defense spending but have dealt a serious blow to Russian military capability. Eliminating or reducing U.S. aid would effectively mean caving to authoritarian pressure, weakening deterrence in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.

The United States must continue to improve its forward-deployed footprint. It is America's goal to fight the adversary far from its shores, and to do so requires forward-stationing forces in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Several examples of this could include: maintaining Multi-Domain Task Forces in Europe that are equipped with long-range precision-strike systems; increasing surface ships stationed at Rota, Spain, as well as submarines in Guam; and fully funding Agile Combat Employment initiatives such as Deployable Airbase Sets to ensure the sufficient dispersal of air assets in a crisis.

Another important policy initiative is to ensure our Allies and partners are properly investing to win. This means both NATO and Asian allies — Japan, Australia, South Korea, Philippines and Taiwan — must seek to spend at least 3.0% of GDP on defense: In Asia, only Korea and Taiwan are close. None of these countries should operate on the assumption that U.S. support is a substitute for their own sacrifice. The United States also needs to act like an equitable partner, buying allied weapons and using allied shipbuilding and ship repair facilities whenever feasible. Finally, the United States needs to integrate allies and partners into its command-and-control networks as early in the process as possible.

The threat from the axis of authoritarians is real, no more so than in Ukraine, where Russia's illegal invasion is still ongoing. The military tools required to combat this challenge are clear: The only question is whether the U.S. has the will to invest. With the proper commitments and investments, the next administration can set the United States and allied and partner democracies on the road to success.