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A Grand Strategy of Consolidation

—
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American Power

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The country's new defense strategy envisioned a dramatic shakeup. It prioritized the homeland and repositioned forces that had patrolled distant frontiers for nearly a century. It handed the task of securing farther-flung defensive perimeters to allies, many of which appeared unprepared to take on the burden. Establishment experts were appalled. Hawks warned that the new strategy would embolden adversaries and advocated for the old approach of being strong everywhere at once.

The year was 1904, and the country was the United Kingdom. It faced a dilemma broadly similar to the one the United States now confronts. Its empire was the world's strongest power. Its navy had more warships than the next two largest navies combined. But its strategic situation was deteriorating. Britain's economic

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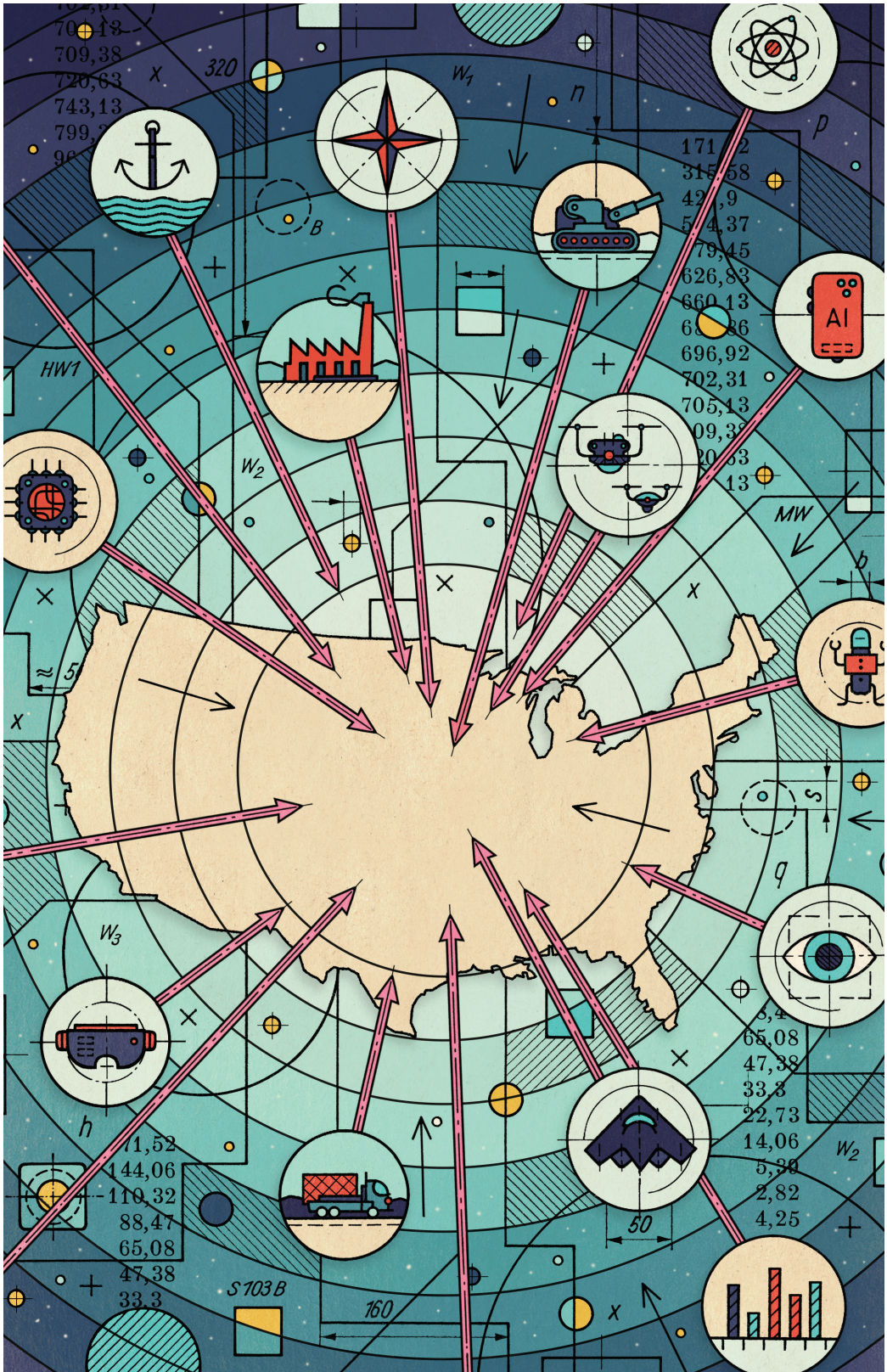


Illustration by Christian Gralingen

primacy was beginning to slip as rising powers surpassed it in industrial production. Imperial Germany was building a blue-water fleet. France and Russia were mounting fresh challenges to British power in Africa and Asia. The United States and Japan, new rivals, were pursuing dominance over their regions. British leaders had a choice: they could keep trying to outgun all these competitors or try something new.

The country's top admiral, John "Jacky" Fisher, opted for the latter course. He outlined a strategy to shore up the British position that could be characterized as consolidation. Consolidation is when a state focuses on its foremost interests while ramping up national resources to increase the power at its disposal over time. This was not retrenchment or acquiescence to national decline. Fisher decided that instead of trying to maintain all of the British Empire's far-flung naval stations, he would prioritize the waters adjacent to the British Isles to deter Germany, the United Kingdom's top threat. To cover the gaps this created elsewhere, he aimed to rely on regional allies, such as Japan and France, that British diplomats were courting. By doing so, he hoped to buy time for the United Kingdom to mobilize its powerful industries and stay ahead of its rivals in leading technologies.

The strategy was controversial. But it allowed the United Kingdom to achieve what the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz called the "highest and simplest law of strategy": concentration. By focusing limited military resources on the main theater, the United Kingdom alleviated the multifront pressure on its empire and put itself on a stronger footing for the coming confrontation with imperial Germany.

The United States is at a similar juncture today. For three and a half decades, it has maintained peace and sustained influence in all the world's major regions without difficult tradeoffs. It continued to assume it can do so even as the country's relative economic strength decreased and rival military buildups eroded its superiority. As a consequence, the United States now faces a serious misalignment between its national power and the strategic objectives to which it has become accustomed.

As the United Kingdom did in Fisher's time, the United States needs to embrace a strategy of consolidation. The second Trump administration has taken significant steps in this direction, undertaking

ambitious domestic reforms to expand national power with respect to China. The war it launched with Iran in February could advance consolidation if it remains narrowly scoped, but it could undermine the strategy if it becomes protracted. Going forward, Washington must fully commit to the consolidation blueprint; future administrations need to stay the course to ensure the strategy bears fruit. That means not getting sucked into big wars or lulled back into old policy habits that reinforce the U.S. strategic predicament. If it focuses on consolidation, the United States has a historic chance to regain its bearings as a great power and prevail in a sustained competition with China, the most powerful adversary in U.S. history.

SPREAD TOO THIN

American power is overextended. The country's commitments exceed the financial and military resources at its disposal. This overextension—which is plainly visible to its citizens, its allies, and its adversaries—resulted from shifts in the international balance of power but also from past U.S. policy choices. The collapse of the Soviet Union left the United States with no peer competitor. Washington reacted by cutting defense spending while expanding its military operations worldwide. After the 9/11 attacks in 2001, it launched large, sustained deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq and military operations in more than a dozen other countries.

The financial and human costs of these wars are well documented. Less publicly appreciated is the fact that the United States undertook 30 years of continuous expeditionary warfare while allowing the structural foundations of its military power—its defense industrial base, shipbuilding capacity, and nuclear capability—to wither. Peripheral wars neither substantially increased the United States' access to resources nor even, as their architects hoped, expanded the number of U.S.-aligned democracies. Instead, they depleted U.S. strength in countless ways, including by deferring military modernization, shrinking the Pentagon's arsenal, and driving long-term sovereign debt so high that it hobbled Washington's ability to invest in the country's future.

Economic overextension is another self-inflicted wound. U.S. military operations since 2001 added \$8 trillion to the national debt. In that same period, entitlement spending increased by over \$2 trillion until, by 2024, it accounted for 51 percent of the federal budget.

A string of government bailouts, including the stimulus responses to the 2008–9 global financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, added a further \$7 trillion to the debt—a sum comparable to the total amount that the United States spent during World War II. Already, the United States pays more to service its past borrowing than to fund its defense.

A final self-inflicted wound is social in nature. The country's breathtaking fiscal expansion coincided with a deindustrialization that buoyed stock markets but gutted working-class communities that, for generations, had depended on well-paying manufacturing jobs. Between 2000 and 2015, more than 60,000 U.S. factories closed and a third of the country's manufacturing jobs were lost. In Rust Belt communities, wages declined, unemployment rose, and, for middle-aged men, life expectancies fell.

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Drug overdose deaths and suicides rose nationwide.

External factors have also helped spread the United States too thin. As the country grew weaker, its field of competitors was expanding. Thirty years ago, the United States faced no peer adversaries. Today, it faces a full peer, China, and an emboldened Russia, as well as threats from Iran, North Korea, and a bevy of nonstate actors. China's power has increased spectacularly. In 1991, its GDP was \$2 trillion in inflation-adjusted dollars. In 2024, it was \$37 trillion, an increase of 1,500 percent. China has used its growing wealth to mount a historic military buildup. Between 1991 and 2023, it expanded defense spending from \$23 billion (in today's dollars) to more than \$300 billion, a 1,300 percent increase. In 2024 alone, a single Chinese shipbuilder produced more ships than the United States has built since 1945.

The three most recent U.S. National Defense Strategies have made it clear that the U.S. military is no longer postured or equipped to fight more than one major rival at a time. Like the United Kingdom in the early twentieth century, the United States faces the danger of a war on multiple fronts that would be beyond its immediate ability to handle—what the Pentagon calls the “simultaneity” problem.

In sum, the United States faces more numerous enemies and greater internal constraints than it did either during the Cold War

or in the post–Cold War period. It has a military that, until recently, was principally configured for peripheral expeditionary warfare rather than for conflict with a peer opponent and debt overhangs that preclude it from borrowing at the levels required for a major war. The gulf between Washington’s means and the ends toward which it may soon need to apply these means is only growing.

RECHARGING THE BATTERIES

The goal of consolidation is to narrow the gap between a state’s means and ends by systematically increasing the former and limiting or redefining the latter. It revolves around the idea that a great power can replenish its strength by confronting hard decisions, with a view to improving its power position relative to where it otherwise would have been. In practice, that means proactively accepting strategic tradeoffs as a necessary evil in the short term while vigorously renovating underlying structural factors—technology, alliances, industrial production—to alleviate or even transcend those tradeoffs over the long haul.

Consolidation is not the same as retrenchment. Both are responses to overstretch. But they differ in the basic problem they aim to address and the end goal they attempt to achieve. Retrenchment occurs when a great power believes that its core is so depleted that no changes, however creative, will allow it to maintain its old position. The great power’s goal is to give up what it holds as a way of reducing the burden. By contrast, consolidation proceeds from the premise that a great power’s core of strength remains viable but has been mismanaged in ways that undercut its potential. Here, the great power’s goal is to preserve and replenish what it has by reweighting its external obligations and mobilizing its resource base.

Many of history’s most successful consolidations were undertaken by great powers at their zenith that needed a period of focused recuperation to gain a second wind. A classic example is the Roman Empire during Hadrian’s reign. Immediately before he became emperor in AD 117, Rome had embarked on wars that extended its power deeper into eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and the Middle East. Although these campaigns were militarily successful, they overextended the Roman army and depleted the empire’s coffers. Hadrian consolidated by disgorging his predecessor Trajan’s conquests and fortifying a defensible perimeter along the Roman

Empire's natural borders: the Rhine, Danube, and Euphrates Rivers. He negotiated a peace with Rome's top adversary (the Parthian empire in present-day Iran), delegated more to allies, and ramped up domestic economic and administrative reforms. The result was a new golden age.

Nearer to the present, U.S. President Richard Nixon embarked on a form of consolidation in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the United States was war-weary but not in true decline. Nixon's goal was to refocus Washington on its main contest with the Soviet Union. Like Hadrian and Fisher, he pursued *détente* with rivals and shifted security burdens to allies, such as by adopting the Guam Doctrine, which held Asian partners responsible for their own conventional defense. He paired these moves with an ambitious program of economic reform, renegotiating trade relations with allies, expanding domestic energy production, and investing in U.S. infrastructure and technological innovation. This eased fiscal pressures, increased exports, and allowed the United States to refocus its military expenditures.

Not all attempts at consolidation succeed. In the fifteenth century, the Ming dynasty attempted to consolidate Chinese power following a period of expansion. It strengthened the Great Wall and improved agriculture and infrastructure but failed to adequately reform governing institutions and shore up its defenses against the Mongols and the Manchu, eventually leading it to succumb to outside pressure and collapse. Between World War I and II, the British Empire attempted what on paper looked like an inspired attempt at consolidation that included imperial trade preferences (lowering tariffs within the empire and raising them for everyone else) and political devolution. By that point, however, the burdens on the empire were out of all proportion to its small resource base; the United Kingdom failed to stave off a multifront war and eventually slipped from the ranks of the great powers. In the late 1980s, the Soviet Union tried to consolidate by cutting its losses in Afghanistan, using arms control to reduce defense burdens, restructuring the economy, and opening up politically. But its government was ultimately too ideologically rigid to make the reforms it needed to save itself.

Certain basic conditions need to exist for consolidation to succeed. First, a state must have enough baseline power: the entire premise

of consolidation is that undermobilized reservoirs of strength can be tapped with wiser management. When no amount of mobilization can possibly match the scale of external threats, retrenchment becomes inevitable. Second, a state has to possess the will and focus to carry out a consolidation strategy. That requires strong leaders who can force unpopular policies onto the agenda (and manage the distraction of inevitable crises) and a political system able to sustain long-term plans. Finally, consolidation takes time. It is a period of intentional respite from costly foreign policy adventures and, above all, the supremely taxing trial of great-power war. Both allies and enemies have a say in the strategy's success—allies, because they must consent to a revised bargain that requires more from them, and enemies, because the consolidating state needs a period of relative stability to rehabilitate its position.

A FRESH START

The second Trump administration has pursued key elements of consolidation, as demonstrated both by its strategic documents and by most, although not all, of its major policies. The 2025 National Security Strategy explicitly identified the widening gap between the United States' means and ends—the starting point for any consolidation strategy—as the organizing problem in U.S. statecraft. The NSS proposed a program of national revitalization that rebalances the country's external commitments and makes generational domestic investments in core capabilities to increase U.S. power relative to its main rival, China, over time.

Similarly, the 2026 National Defense Strategy marks a historic shift—and bears a striking resemblance to Fisher's 1904 approach. Like Fisher, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby, the NDS's chief architect, had the foresight to see that his country was fundamentally unprepared to face a new main threat and the courage to devise an original strategy that defied the political mainstream. The NDS calls for a stronger focus on the Western Hemisphere and China, a controlled reduction of U.S. efforts in Europe and the Middle East, and an ambitious program for mobilizing U.S. military-industrial resources.

Both the NSS and the NDS embrace a logic of tradeoffs. By shifting focus away from long-standing policy priorities in Europe and the Middle East, they accept greater risks in those theaters. By

pressuring allies toward greater reciprocity in security and trade, they accept a risk of friction in these relationships. By supporting a degree of strategic cohabitation with major adversaries China and Russia, they go against the establishment wisdom that both powers must be simultaneously contained.

Even before it released these strategy documents, the Trump administration began reducing the day-to-day burden on U.S. power and replenishing the country's core strengths. It has sought to reduce legacy commitments in nonpriority foreign theaters by drawing down the U.S. troop presence in Syria and trimming military aid to Ukraine. It reduced spending on foreign aid and international institutions and increased resources for securing the U.S. borders, fighting drug trafficking, and assisting friendly regimes in Latin and South America to stanch the spread of Chinese and Russian influence there. Its efforts to bring Venezuela to heel and pursue U.S. interests in Greenland both followed a consolidationist logic, as have its attempts to reconfigure its relations with U.S. allies. It successfully pressed European allies to endorse a five percent defense-spending target in NATO; in early 2026, it outlined a strategic overhaul of the alliance that would shift the conventional defense burden to European countries. In tandem, it has used tariffs to negotiate new trade agreements with allies and solicit domestic investment pledges that will boost U.S. reindustrialization; these pledges total \$5 trillion so far. Tariffs have brought in around \$200 billion and, if they remain in place, could add an estimated \$5.2 trillion to the United States' revenue over the next decade.

Like Nixon, Trump has sought *détente* with major rivals. With Russia, his administration has pursued diplomacy aimed at ending the war in Ukraine and concurrent moves (including oil-price diplomacy and closing energy sanction loopholes) to pressure Russia toward an off-ramp. With China, it has used a combination of pressure and sustained diplomacy to attempt to rebalance trade relations in the United States' favor without triggering a sudden deterioration that could lead to major economic shocks or a military confrontation. Although the terms of a new trade architecture with China are still being negotiated, the process of pursuing one is consistent with the consolidationist logic of seeking cohabitation with a major rival to buy time and get the pieces in place (including

expanded semiconductor production, reshored supply chains, and deepened critical minerals capacity) for a stronger future position.

At home, the administration has pursued rejuvenation by encouraging reinvestment in domestic manufacturing. In addition to seeking lower tariffs on U.S. exports, it has expanded tax credits for strategic industries, reduced onerous environmental permitting frameworks for industrial projects, and funded high-tech investment hubs. It has launched military procurement reforms that prioritize contracts for innovative commercial startups and unveiled more long-term contracts to accomplish sustained production of the most-needed weapons systems. It has asked for a 50 percent increase in the defense budget and used executive orders to press for greater investments in military production capacity.

The administration has also sought to accelerate innovation in tech sectors that will determine the outcome of the U.S. competition with China. Its artificial intelligence strategy lightened regulatory constraints that hamper breakthroughs, accelerated permitting for AI data centers, opened federal land for hyperscale computing facilities, marshaled large private investments in AI facilities, and began the process of expanding the power grid to secure abundant energy sources for data centers the size of several city blocks.

Undergirding all these moves is a coordinated effort to make fuller use of U.S. natural resources. The Trump administration has rolled back regulatory restrictions on the production and export of fossil fuels, opened federal lands and offshore areas for exploration, and increased funding for uranium enrichment. In 2025, U.S. production of crude oil hit record highs and its production of liquefied natural gas surpassed the output of the next three largest producers combined.

It remains to be seen how the Iran war will affect this strategy. If the United States can expeditiously accomplish its main military objectives of destroying Iran's nuclear capabilities and degrading its ballistic missile arsenal and industrial base, it will ease the simultaneity burden by effectively neutering the weakest of the country's three main adversaries. But already, the war has depleted the U.S. military's arsenal and its readiness for a war with China. A conflict

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that stretches on for months or involves boots on the ground would undermine consolidation by draining U.S. blood and treasure and prompting sustained energy price hikes, higher inflation, subdued growth, and social blowback.

Earlier consolidation strategies came to similar forks in the road. Hadrian faced a crisis in the Levant that required the dispatch of several legions and could have become a multifront problem. In Fisher's time, the British faced crises in Asia, North Africa, and the Balkans that could have derailed his plans for naval concentration. The Nixon administration faced an escalatory spiral in Vietnam that could have prevented it from reprioritizing Europe. In all these cases, leaders managed the crises without allowing them to subvert the central logic of their strategy. For the United States now, management will mean using any successes in Iran to truly deprioritize the Middle East going forward.

NO PAIN, NO GAIN

Like all strategies, consolidation comes with risks. Indeed, it requires a willingness to accept obvious near-term risk for long-term gain. These risks fall into two main categories. The first is that adversaries see the strategy's underlying purpose and accelerate their plans for aggression. China, in particular, could see a window of opportunity and try to take Taiwan. Similarly, Russia might try to exploit a reduction of U.S. efforts in Europe before allied burden shifting has fully materialized. Both sets of risks increase the longer the Iran war goes on.

Critics of the Trump strategy on the hawkish right claim that prioritizing the Western Hemisphere and China will undercut the U.S. military's ability to thwart rivals in the other theaters. Some call for the United States to quickly expand its armed forces to a size that could handle two or more wars simultaneously (thus returning to the old 2- or 2.5-war standard) while also recapitalizing the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Although it is conceptually attractive, this remedy would require immense additional public borrowing. And it does not account for how the United States would meet its existing commitments during the many years such a buildup would take to complete. Prioritization is a necessity, and it must be tackled now, voluntarily and logically.

The second set of risks has to do with U.S. allies and partners who could fail to understand or be convinced by a consolidation

strategy, perceive it as retrenchment or even hostility, and respond in ways that hamper Washington's ability to realize the strategy's benefits. Some critics on the left allege that by abandoning key components of the so-called rules-based international order, the Trump administration will prevent the United States from reaping the benefits of global cooperation. They worry that allies may conclude that Washington is forfeiting its role as a reliable security provider and will seek closer relationships with Beijing and Moscow.

Like the hawks, however, these critics tend to exaggerate the solvency and sustainability of the status quo. They treat "order" as something intrinsically valuable and an end in itself, even though elements of that very order—lopsided trade agreements, mass migration, and transnational protocols that left China largely unconstrained—have eroded U.S. power. Although it is true that states tend to realign when old structures no longer serve their interests, current geopolitical realities will likely prevent a foundational realignment. In many places, including in the Indo-Pacific, U.S. partners lack an alternative anchor for regional security. And the NATO countries' reliance on U.S. defense technology and planning ensures a degree of dependence that cannot be undone by speeches advocating greater European sovereignty. Even the EU, for all its trading might, faces real limits on how much it can strengthen its strategic ties with China. Europe's large, inward-turning domestic market cannot absorb the goods of a fellow exporter—and vice versa. If anything, the onset of a new economic shock from China's burgeoning overcapacity may drive the EU closer to the United States.

Still, alliances matter, and Washington cannot rely on blind structural forces to hold them together. Getting optimal performance out of allies is essential to successful consolidation. Trump's hard bargaining with allies—which alarmed so many establishment observers—was essential to get them to do things they otherwise would not have done. Now his administration must pull them closer. One way to do that is by revamping NATO along the lines Colby proposed in a February speech in Brussels: in such an arrangement, European allies would revert to focusing on territorial defense in exchange for U.S. strategic and nuclear backstopping, a concept broadly similar to Nixon's Guam Doctrine. There as well as in Asia, the aim could be to integrate U.S. and allied defense industrial bases to acquire the capability to surge production for vital munitions.

The best way to keep allies on side is to explain to them frequently, coherently, and persuasively why the United States is making changes and how those changes will be in their interests, too. That is exactly what the Trump administration has started to do. Colby laid out the material case in February. A few days later, Secretary of State Marco Rubio laid out the civilizational case at the Munich Security Conference by arguing that a “renewal” of U.S. power is a prerequisite to the defense of the West. Sustaining these messages, while working pragmatically to help partners implement their planned defense buildups, will mitigate the inevitable friction that comes with prioritization.

BACK ON SOLID GROUND

Trump has taken important steps to set the United States on a path to consolidation. Some of the very qualities that have most alarmed his critics—his conceptual heterodoxy and the speed with which he changes policies—have been crucial to jar the U.S. system, as well as U.S. allies, into a mindset of urgency. The United States now needs to stay the course by keeping its frontiers as stable as possible and wisely using the time that consolidation buys to strengthen the U.S. power base. Most important, it must not allow the war in Iran to become a morass. Even a small regional war, if it becomes protracted, could derail consolidation.

Washington must also wield diplomacy to the fullest extent possible to sustain and, within certain limits, widen the *détentes* Trump is trying to build with Russia and China. *Détente* does not signal weakness any more than Hadrian’s peace with the Parthians did; the goal is to constrain rivals from pursuing their optimal strategies while freeing the United States to pursue its optimal strategy.

With Russia, Washington should continue its current dual track of diplomacy and pressure. Its aim should be to end the war with an intact Ukrainian glaxis, just beyond the formal U.S. security perimeter, that is strong enough to impede Russia’s expansion and (together with NATO’s rearmament) deflect Russia’s attention to its eastern territories, where China is making deep inroads.

It should continue to spurn Russia’s push for a new, comprehensive security settlement in Europe, which would only have the effect of drawing Moscow’s energies westward. But it should encourage new initiatives in arms control. Because of the Ukraine war, Russia will

need to redirect spending from its nuclear arsenal toward rebuilding its conventional forces. This presents an opportunity to revise old arms frameworks, minted when the United States had only one major rival, to account for the need to deter China.

With China, the United States should likewise strive to constrain the frame of competition. It should continue to emphasize deterrence by denial instead of primacy as the goal of U.S. power in Asia. It should engage Beijing primarily on trade, with the goal of reaching a new geoeconomic *détente* that stops short of full decoupling while erecting restrictions in high-tech areas to protect key competitive advantages.

As the commercial plank develops, Washington should be willing to explore a security component to U.S.-Chinese relations. The United States and China need to have deeper discussions about the strategic implications of emerging space and cyber technologies, for example, which harbor rapid escalatory potential. The Trump administration is also right to emphasize the development of new crisis-management mechanisms to ensure that small incidents and accidents do not spiral into unintended conflict.

Washington must pair its diplomatic outreach to rivals with a comprehensive effort to convert its alliances into more mature and well-integrated structures. The proximate goal should be to develop alliances that can reduce the United States' simultaneity burden by making substantially bigger contributions to conventional security in their respective regions. That will mean that future U.S. administrations will have to pressure allies not only to fulfill their laudable pledges to increase defense spending but to accomplish what this money is meant for—improved readiness, deeper magazines, and greater warfighting prowess.

Beyond that, the United States should want to get its alliances to a point where allies not only defend themselves more effectively but also actively augment the U.S. power base. It should want allies that provide market access to support U.S. reindustrialization while continuing to support the dollar as the premier reserve currency; whose defense industries are aligned with U.S. industries in integrated structures; and whose tech regulations boost rather than

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hamper U.S. innovation in fields such as AI. Getting to this outcome will take time and require a revised grand bargain with allies that codifies reciprocity across the board in both security and trade so that reciprocity is not just a transient byproduct of tariff threats but part of the foundation of the relationship.

The hardest challenge will be internal. The quickest way for the United States to derail consolidation would be to lurch back toward the habits that led to overextension—fixating on achieving defense primacy worldwide, going back to nonreciprocal trade deals, latching back onto transnational causes that are detached from the U.S. national interest, pursuing nation building and democracy promotion with missionary zeal, or reverting to economic policies that accelerate the hollowing out of the American heartland. The United States has big built-in advantages over its rivals, and it has much deeper reservoirs of strength than either Rome or the United Kingdom did in their prime. But its debt has become an albatross. Eventually, there is no getting around the fact that the United States must confront hard tradeoffs in spending. That is difficult to envision in the current polarized setting. But a good starting point would be to develop a consensus on consolidation as a strategy and its corollaries of rebalancing commitments abroad and rejuvenation at home. Ultimately, the optimal way out of the debt problem is stronger economic growth—which can only be achieved by consolidation's self-fortifying mix of deregulation, focused investment, and increased energy production.

If the United States can stay the consolidationist path, it could, a decade or so down the road, find itself in a much-improved state of affairs. It would have a thriving economy fueled by abundant cheap energy, a strong manufacturing base, and an AI sector second to none. It would have confident allies fielding serious militaries that have fundamentally altered the balance of power in the world's major regions and have freed the country from the worst aspects of the simultaneity problem. It would have a deeper arsenal of weapons, backed by a reanimated American industry that is less reliant on its main rival to develop lifesaving medicines, power the U.S. economy, or acquire the materials to wage war. That United States would have truly gained a second wind as a great power—and be in a position to ensure its citizens and allies a continuation of the safety and prosperity to which they have become accustomed well into the twenty-first century. 🌐