What an America First Nuclear Strategy Entails

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President Donald Trump's instinctive opposition to nuclear weapons or nuclear proliferation isn't particularly novel and has been publicly stated several times. He has commented that the US is spending too much on nuclear weapons, that China is predicted to catch up, and no one will be using the weapons anyway, as that will lead to armageddon. The task of this short essay is to briefly explore the theoretical framework of an America First grand-strategy, and attempt to translate that into concrete nuclear policy. It is not to delve into deep tactical or moral questions, but rather elaborate on how an America First Nuclear strategy is conceptualised. The aim is to provide a starting point for future debates.

Accordingly, this essay proceeds to argue that there is a mild but important theoretical contradiction at the heart of the America First approach towards great power politics, but that in nuclear strategy, counter-intuitively, there might be more continuity and convergence to traditional American nuclear strategy. It then argues that the current 'burden-shifting' approach outlined by the administration is the perfect compromise position. It finally lays out some brief policy outlines, towards an eventual tripartite engagement with Russia and China on nuclear limitation talks. This attempts to translate disparate instincts into a concrete nuclear policy strategy and provoke debate.

Overview of an America First Rationale

The baseline principle of an American realist grand strategy is perpetual, as Hans Morgenthau once wrote. "We have conceived the two wars which we fought essentially as two holy crusades, engaged in by a good people against an evil one. It so happened, that what was really at stake in those crusades was not at all the extirpation of evil of its own sake, but the restoration of the balance of power in Europe", Morgenthau wrote. [1] "Without knowing it, we followed the course which has been charted by Washington, Hamilton, and Jefferson, a course which Great Britain had followed for more than four centuries. From the beginning of the Republic, we have always regarded the dominance of Europe by one single power as a threat to the security of the United States, and however sentimentality and utopianism may have distorted the stark facts, of this power situation, and of this power interest, we have pursued this interest under the guise of crusading ideologies."

Accordingly, one can extrapolate a few guidelines by translating that framework into policy. As a maritime power, the interest of the US is to oppose an emergence of a hegemonic or expansionist empire in either Europe or Asia. One hegemon, under one flag and one army,

[1] See, Morgenthau, Hans J. "Germany, the political problem", in *Germany and the Future of Europe* (1950, University of Chicago Press)

uniting Europe or Asia will have enormous strategic depth, production capacity, manpower, and trade surplus, to challenge the US, dwarf American production, threaten American trade routes and prosperity, and destabilise American relative power. A hegemon in Europe might also choose to throw its weight behind China, to isolate the United States; or work towards eroding the dollar hegemony and sanctions power, permanently. All that will have second order effects on US security, even in the western hemisphere.

That strategy continued post-cold-war, when opposing any reemergence of Germany and Japan as a hegemonic challenger in absence of a Russian power was one of the key interests in the strategy. [2] Opposing any nuclear proliferation was a US grand-strategy. "Nuclear proliferation, if unchecked by superpower action, could tempt Germany, Japan and other industrial powers to acquire nuclear weapons to deter attack from regional foes. This could start them down the road to global competition with the United States and, in a crisis over national interests, military rivalry." [3]

Prior to the second world war, in an era of functional multipolarity, similar to the one that has now reemerged, the US managed to have impermanent alignments and trade protectionism as a framework. The structural conditions post second world war resulted in the US attempting to institutionalise peace in Europe and Asia, with various different alliances. The US post WW2 and especially post-Cold war strategy also faced that particular contradiction, whereupon the American elite's strategic instinct and desire to be the top-dog in Europe and Asia often came in conflict with the public desire to cut spending in foreign policy, as well as structural constraints such as incurring debts. [4]

On the question of nuclear strategy, however, a historical strategic consistency is visible. The United States, since the dawn of her hegemony, has opposed nuclear proliferation. During the late Cold War the US wanted to have bilateral relations with the USSR aimed towards arms control, and immediately after the Cold War, in Ukraine, and Europe, the US worked to ensure that rogue elements did not take control of the Soviet arsenal spread across the post-Soviet space. [5]

As the US was rapidly drawing down troops from Europe between 1993-1996, the question of US extended deterrence was developed. One of the causal logics behind that was to discourage European states from rushing towards independent deterrents. [6] The current grand strategy, while different from arch-primacy, still mirrors that foundational principle; one which encourages a rapid drawing down of conventional troops, while maintaining the extended nuclear deterrence in place and discouraging nuclear proliferation. [7]

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[2] Tangential to the current strategic direction, the 1992 "Defense Planning: Guidance FY 1994-1999" policy brief cites that "Our first objective is to prevent the re-emergence of a new rival. This is a dominant consideration underlying the new regional defense strategy and requires that we endeavor to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power. These regions include Western Europe, East Asia, the territory of the former Soviet Union, and Southwest Asia. There are three additional aspects to this objective: First the U.S must show the leadership necessary to establish and protect a new order that holds the promise of convincing potential competitors that they need not aspire to a greater role or pursue a more aggressive posture to protect their legitimate interests. Second, in the non-defense areas, we must account sufficiently for the interests of the advanced industrial nations to discourage them from challenging our leadership or seeking to overturn the established political and economic order. Finally, we must maintain the mechanisms for deterring potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role." see, archived at NY Times, https://archive.ph/fytp5

[3] See, Tyer, Patrick. "U.S. strategy plan calls for insuring no rivals develop" March 8, 1992 NY Times, archived at https://archive.ph/fytp5; Additionally, see Defense Planning: Guidance FY 1994-1999 April 16, 1992. https://www.archives.gov/files/declassification/iscap/pdf/2008-003-docs1-12.pdf

[4] For detailed accounts of the US dash to global hegemony, read Stephen Wertheim's *Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of U.S. Global Supremacy*, Harvard University Press, 2020; and A. G. Hopkins' *American Empire: A Global History*, Princeton University Press, 2018.

[5] For further details, see "U.S.-Russia Nuclear Arms Control 1949-2021", available at the Council on Foreign Relations archival database, and, "Factsheet on U.S.-Russian Nuclear Arms Control Agreements at a Glance", available at Arms Control Association.

[6] See, Tyer, Patrick. "U.S. strategy plan …"1992 NY Times, archived at https://archive.ph/fytp5; Additionally, see Defense Planning: Guidance FY 1994-1999 April 16, 1992.

[7] For a detailed outline of the rationale behind the current American grand-strategy in Europe, read, Maitra, S. "The Best NATO Is a Dormant NATO", *Foreign Affairs*, November 2024.

“Our transatlantic alliance has endured for decades. And we fully expect that it will be sustained for generations to come. But this won't just happen” the Secretary of War Pete Hegseth said in a speech in Brussels in February 2025, adding “it will require our European allies to step into the arena and take ownership of conventional security on the continent.” [8] It was repeated by Undersecretary Elbridge Colby. “Germany is Europe’s largest economy, with a history of major contributions to NATO collective defense during the Cold War. It is vital and justified that Germany step up and lead in Europe’s conventional defense…This includes accelerating the buildup of European conventional forces, capabilities, and industries to enable Europe to assume primary responsibility for its own conventional defense.” [9]

The United States will, for the near foreseeable future, continue to keep the nuclear power and escalation threshold in American hands, with an extended deterrence umbrella firmly in place, and would prefer to keep any nuclear proliferation in check, as has been American policy for over eighty years, while pushing Europe to shoulder more security of the continent.

There is a theoretical contradiction within the heart of America First grand-strategy. America is a proud meritocratic republic, and accordingly, is susceptible to the democratic whims of public opinion. Simultaneously, both the elite and the public of the United States are reluctant to shoulder the necessary financial burden for imperialism or hegemony, while both desire to be the *primus inter pares*, a top-dog in international anarchy.

This suggests the need for a compromise position in which the US shifts the majority of the conventional security to allies, to cut costs and prevent imperial overstretch, and share the burden, as pushed forward by the new National Security Strategy of President Trump. Simultaneously, it would keep the nuclear escalation threshold under American control, discourage any chance of a mad dash towards more nuclear weapons, discourage proliferation, and start reduction talks with rivals, such as China and Russia.

The potential for European hegemony remains minimal, and the trends indicate that Europe, in general, and the EU in particular, is losing to the United States in competition. Europe remains internally divided, a self-declared “regulatory superpower” that stifles innovation, no longer at parity in GDP or higher-tech, and beset by structural forces such as low birth rates, populist revolution, and rising centrifugal nationalist movements opposed to any further European consolidation.

The European Union is an artificial construct and is a product of *Pax Americana*. U.S. bases in Turkey and Germany are sufficient to provide extended deterrence over Europe and the Mediterranean. The US can retrench from the other bases and operational theaters, while maintaining a “minimal credible deterrence” posture.

Rise, and Return, of Near-Peer Rivals

The question of individual great power peers is a distinct concern. The United States is in an isolated position with regard to Chinese and Russian trust in American nuclear posture. Consider that China and Russia have both signalled, in joint statements, that President Trump’s plan to build a Golden Iron Dome missile shield would further destabilise relations

[8] Opening Remarks by Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth at Ukraine Defense Contact Group (As Delivered) Feb. 12, 2025 Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth Brussels, Belgium, US DoD available at https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/4064113/opening-remarks-by-secretary-of-defense-pete-hegseth-at-ukraine-defense-contact/

[9] See, Colby, E., X post, archived at https://archive.ph/I4Mc8

among all. [10] Meanwhile, Russia has notified that it would cease to implement any arms control for as long as the US is arming Ukraine. [11] As recently as February 2025, President Vladimir Putin said, "We and the United States have the question of prolonging New START. Probably everyone else has forgotten, but I remember it is going out of force in about a year, in February 2026" a marked hint for those who are prudent enough to notice. [12] The Russian side has refused to negotiate or engage in any nuclear discussion since the start of the conflict in Ukraine.

For now, the nuclear parity between Russia and the US holds, but the Chinese side is steadily increasing its arsenal, risking an all-out nuclear arms race. Beijing's warheads and delivery systems are supposed to touch around 1500 by 2035, reaching the current deployed warhead status of both the US and Russia. [13] That is added to the Chinese naval buildup, dollar-proofing their economy, storing grain, and its gold buying spree. China is also rapidly modernising its delivery systems. [14]

While both the US and Russia have enormous reserves of over 5000 warheads, the risk of a spiral is ever-present due to a third external factor, a *security dilemma* between the US and China. Forced to confront a more aggressive Beijing, the US might recall warheads currently in reserve or deploy additional missiles and submarines, thereby exceeding limits agreed to with Russia, thereby sparking a classic case of miscommunication of intent, a *security-dilemma* spiral, and an arms race. It is important to remember in this context that the early Cold War was a period of extreme nuclear brinkmanship, and only after intense bilateral negotiations and nonproliferation treaties did the dynamic stabilize. The US has little direct negotiation with China, outside of a multilateral comprehensive test ban framework. The Chinese side has shown no interest in negotiating either, as they are enjoying a tactical alignment with Russia.

A New Great Power Concert and Equilibrium

As the saying goes, everything starts with strategy in this business. An America First nuclear strategy seeks to balance nuclear preponderance and nuclear stability, and to avoid a great-power "collusion" among the world's leading powers, including arms-reduction talks and grand bargains. [15]

The Trump administration has prudently tied a grand-bargain with Russia with an attempt to organise a new security architecture in Europe. Russia and China are not natural allies, and addressing their differences begins with satisfying some of Russia's strategic grievances and

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[10] See, "Kremlin suggests 'Golden Dome' could lead to resumption of Russia-U.S. arms control contacts", *Reuters*, May 21, 2025; and, "China 'seriously concerned' over US Golden Dome defence system", *Reuters*, May 21, 2025; "Kremlin Walks Back Criticism of Trump's 'Golden Dome' Missile Defense Plan", *AFP,* May 21, 2025.

[11] Read Bugos, Shannon, "Russia Suspends New START Arms Control Today" March 2023,, Arms Control Association.

[12] See, Gottemoeller, Rose. "Arms Control Is Not Dead Yet", *Foreign Affairs*, Rose Gottemoeller April 15, 2025

[13] Kristensen, et al. "Chinese nuclear weapons, 2025", *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, March 12, 2025

[14] No great power takes these steps, unless they are at least preparing for some form of long term conflict.
Consider, "Unpacking China's Naval Buildup", CSIS brief, June 5, 2024; "China raises 2025 budget for grain stockpiling, targets higher domestic output", *Reuters*, March 6, 2025; "Exclusive: China's central bank asks state lenders to reduce dollar purchases, sources say", *Reuters*, April 9, 2025, "China Gold Imports Surge to 11-Month High Despite Record Prices", *Bloomberg*, May 20, 2025

[15] For a detailed thesis on why the current US administration is moving away from great power competition, towards a more great power concert, or collusion, see Goddard, Stacie E. "The Rise and Fall of Great-Power Competition Trump's New Spheres of Influence", *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2025.

its desire for great-power status in international relations. Moscow is concerned about the US's renewed interest in missile defenses, which could serve as a starting point for talks on Russian exports of advanced technologies to China.

U.S. retrenchment from Europe is another issue that may interest Russia and could prompt future strategic arms reduction talks. The US can institutionalise operational changes in postures in Europe, involving a reduction of warheads and removal of strategic weapons from the European mainland to bases in the Arctic or the Pacific. As previously mentioned, the nuclear bases in Germany and Turkey are strategically enough for the US to provide extended deterrence over Europe; the rest of the bases can close down, or be transferred to the Europeans.

The US can also encourage a joint command of Britain and France to keep their strategic assets as a second-tier deterrence over the rest of Europe, thus achieving two aims at the same time: satiating a European fear of nuclear abandonment, and bringing in European partners in multilateral talks with Russia and the US, thereby reducing the chances of future nuclear brinkmanship. Moving away from static deterrence and focusing more on subsurface patrolling capacity would also enhance US deterrence against both China and Russia.

A parallel negotiation with China may depend on the ultimate direction of an America First foreign policy. Aims toward coercion and aims toward correction entail different nuclear policies. If coercion is the aim, then China is a rival; therefore, all levers of national power should be geared toward preventing their rise to peer status, including sanctioning China's nuclear buildup, isolating Russia from China, and promoting greater trade alignment with the EU.

Evidence, however, suggests that the aim is great power collusion, and not competition. [16] That implies that China, similar to Russia, is a strategic competitor, and that Washington isn't willing to be engaged in a do-or-die spiral with Beijing. That the US will compete in spheres when needed and aim towards strategic independence from Chinese supply chains, but overall, there are chances of a peaceful coexistence. [17]

Naturally, nuclear negotiations with China would reflect that reality and focus on arms control and joint pledges about deployment limits, including warheads and types of platforms. The US could initiate tripartite talks with China and Russia on hypersonic delivery systems, artificial intelligence, orbital bombardment systems, which would render current deterrence theories obsolete and precipitate a spiral that all three powers seek to avoid. [18] Congressional ratification for any such treaty would be difficult, but not impossible. And foreign policy negotiation, however, is a presidential prerogative and is a good start for a long-term trust-building measure.

Nuclear policies are not an end in themselves, but mere tools in the service of a great power's grand strategy. The American public consistently opposes liberal interventionism, nation-building, and wars of choice. Added to that, structural problems such as the rise of China, return of Russia to form, failure of wars and colonial policing in strategic backwaters, unlimited spending in defense of far eastern European borders, and the decline in the relative power of the US, have added to the growing retrenchment attitude of the electorate.

Multipolarity is inherently unstable and begs for realism, restraint, and prudence, as the chances of survival after costly misadventures are lower for a great power than under

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[16] Goddard, Stacie E. "The Rise and Fall…", *Foreign Affairs*

[17] For an overview, listen to Gottemoeller, Rose, "Owen Harries Lecture- US-Russia-China: The nuclear triumvirate of the 21st century" available at https://resources.lowyinstitute.org/events/owen-harries-lecture-us-russia-china-the-nuclear-triumvirate-of-the-21st-century

[18] Read, Gottemoeller, Rose, writing extensively on this, in *Foreign Affairs*.

unipolarity. And just like any previous era of multipolarity, even the preponderant power of the order seeks equilibrium, over primacy. [19]

The President's policies of higher spending on defense and Golden Dome, enjoy broad support, and there's no evidence that the US will simply give up its predominant position on the globe and be a hemispheric power. That said, American survival would depend on a grand strategy that seeks equilibrium with rival great powers and avoids their bandwagoning against the hegemon.

The US could block any further addition or enlargement of any alliance over which it has extended deterrence. That would signal good faith to Moscow. Simultaneously, even a paired-down US nuclear umbrella over Germany and Turkey would reestablish continuity and calm European nerves, and discourage European rush towards proliferation. Amplifying European conventional power and tactical independence, while discouraging proliferation, will be the key challenge of the near foreseeable future.

The risk of Chinese hegemony, on the other hand, is limited, given China's geographical position and neighbourhood. America enjoys alignments such as the QUAD and AUKUS, and China is surrounded by historically powerful and nationalistic neighbours; any Chinese ~~bid~~ for hegemony would spur a natural counterbalancing coalition. "To put it bluntly: Washington is not going to conquer China or dictate its political future. Nor can Beijing hope to do the same to the United States," Stephen Walt wrote, "coexistence between the two states is not merely desirable; it is unavoidable." [20]

Finally, any effort to limit nuclear arsenals must proceed with a clear-eyed appreciation of the strategic environment. Arms control initiatives and public signaling should avoid creating incentives for allied proliferation, particularly among advanced industrial states such as Germany or South Korea, while also guarding against dynamics that could drive closer coordination between Moscow and Beijing in opposition to U.S. objectives. Sustained deterrence remains indispensable; however, diplomacy should be employed selectively to manage escalation risks, preserve strategic stability, and reduce the likelihood of miscalculation on the continent.

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[19] It is outside the scope of this short essay to go on a tangential discussion on great power behaviour within a multipolarity, but broadly, just as the Concert of Europe, a great power concert in our times would need a perception of equality between the great powers, as well tempered revolutionary instinct (and moral grandstanding) in all, regardless of the actual relative power of each. Accordingly, a new great power concert between the three largest nuclear powers of the world would require, at a minimum, forums which would have inbuilt "confidence building measures" between the three, and regular hotlines and discussion channels, as well as a frank and defined redlines and interests of each.

[20] See, Walt, SM. "Hedging on Hegemony: The Realist Debate over How to Respond to China", May/June 2025, *International Security*