DEBATES ON EXTENDED DETERRENCE IN THE CONTEMPORARY U.S. SCHOLARLY COMMUNITY*

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Abstract: The debate on extended deterrence in the United States remains a central topic within academic discourse, reflecting broader disagreements over the country's global strategic role. This article analyzes the key arguments within this debate, focusing on two dominant camps: proponents of a strategy of primacy, who advocate a robust and expansive deterrence posture aimed at preserving U.S. hegemony, and advocates of restraint, who argue for a more limited approach focused on reducing external commitments and safeguarding vital national interests.

A central issue in this debate concerns the scope of the U.S. security presence in Europe, with the question of Ukraine serving as a persistent catalyst for these discussions for more than three decades. Methodologically, it relies on qualitative analysis of academic sources and expert commentary in order to trace the evolution of debates on extended deterrence. It examines how and to what extent scholarly arguments have evolved in response to changing geopolitical circumstances, particularly in the context of the post–Cold War security architecture, NATO enlargement, and the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Through an analysis of strategic rationales and risk assessments on both sides, the study highlights key points of disagreement regarding credibility, escalation risks, and alliance commitments.

The findings indicate that the approach of the second Trump administration, although not based on identical arguments, shifts the balance in favor of proponents of restraint, who question the long-term sustainability of extended deterrence and emphasize the risks of unintended escalation. In contrast, advocates of primacy continue to view deter-

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rence as a mechanism for maintaining global stability. The persistence of these debates underscores fundamental uncertainty regarding the future of U.S. grand strategy and the balance between deterrence and restraint in an era of shifting global power dynamics.

Keywords: United States, foreign policy, national security, liberal hegemony, primacy strategy, restraint strategy, extended deterrence, realism

Introduction

In recent decades, U.S. perspectives on international relations, as well as the foreign and security policies of successive American administrations, have evolved under the influence of a range of domestic and international, individual, institutional, and structural factors. The latter have arguably been the most consequential: the end of the Cold War, which entailed the disappearance of the United States' principal rival—the Soviet Union—and the emergence of the unipolar moment, established an unrestrained version of liberal internationalism as the dominant framework for strategic thinking about international relations. Under these conditions of a transformed distribution of power within the international system—previously bipolar, now characterized by a single credible pole, the American one—liberal internationalism was embodied in the grand strategy of primacy or liberal hegemony (Mearsheimer, 2018: 120–139).

At the normative level, this strategic posture implied a belief in the universal validity of liberal principles, defined according to the standards of U.S. policy, and within that framework, a unique role for the United States as an actor tasked with defending such an order across all regions and through all available means, including the use of military force. In practical terms, a defining feature of this strategic approach to global politics was the near absence of geographic and sectoral prioritization within Washington's foreign and security policy. Strategic documents during the administrations of William Clinton were adopted almost annually and envisaged extensive engagement across the globe, including in regions not of vital importance to U.S. national security. This represented a departure from a key postulate of modern U.S. foreign policy, which—particularly after World War II—held that, in addition to the so-called "Western Hemisphere" as an exclusive zone of American interests, there existed three other strategically important regions (in which foreign policy instruments nevertheless needed to be carefully calibrated): Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia (Art, 2003; Tow, 1991).

Some authors argue that U.S. grand strategy during the Cold War—not only in its aftermath—can also be characterized as a strategy of primacy or liberal hegemony. Extraregional hegemony—particularly in Western Europe—achieved through the use of political instruments rooted in the ideology of liberal internationalism, which Christopher Layne identifies as the central underpinning of U.S. grand strategy after World War II, represents one such interpretation (Layne, 2006).

As a counterpoint to the strategy of primacy, first within academic debates and gradually within the political sphere, a strategy of restraint emerged. This approach advocated a significant reduction of U.S. global engagement, particularly in the domain of "hard" power—primarily through the withdrawal of military presence beyond U.S. territory, as well as through the redefinition of security arrangements that, in the decades following World War II, had established a broad range of U.S. commitments to allies, partners, and client states through policies of mutual defense, with extended deterrence as their key strategic implication (Posen, 2014).

Deterrence—particularly extended deterrence—constitutes a central element of the strategy of liberal hegemony that has shaped much of U.S. strategic positioning during the Cold War period. For this reason, liberal hegemony cannot be fully understood without reference to the phenomenon of extended deterrence, just as contemporary debates on this issue cannot be analyzed outside the context in which they have emerged. Nevertheless, a prior distinction must be made in order to achieve a more precise conceptual delineation of the subject of inquiry. This concerns the distinction between the concepts of deterrence and defense, which, although related, entail different meanings and, consequently, different logics of action.

According to the classical interpretation offered by Glenn Snyder, "the central theoretical problem in the field of national security policy is the clarification and differentiation of the two central concepts, deterrence and defense. In essence, deterrence involves discouraging the adversary from undertaking military action by presenting the prospect of costs and risks that outweigh its expected gains. Defense, by contrast, involves reducing one's own expected costs and risks in the event that deterrence fails. Deterrence operates at the level of the adversary's intentions; military forces possess deterrent value insofar as they reduce the likelihood of hostile military actions. Defense reduces the adversary's ability to inflict damage and losses upon us; the defensive value of military forces lies in their capacity to mitigate the negative consequences of potential hostile actions, whether these consequences are measured in terms of territorial losses or war damage" (Snyder, 1961: 3–4).

From the fact that the key determinants of decision-making differ—in one case, the adversary's intentions, and in the other, its capabilities—follows Snyder's definition of the logic of deterrence: "the purpose of military deterrence is to reduce the likelihood of enemy attacks by making it sufficiently probable in the enemy's mind that it will incur a net loss as a result of attacking, or at least that the net losses will be greater, or the net gains smaller, than would be the case if it refrained from attacking" (Snyder, 1961: 12).

The attacking state constructs a "risk calculus" based on four factors: the valuation of war aims; the expected costs resulting from various possible responses by the deterring state; the probability of these different responses, including the possibility of no response; and the likelihood of achieving its objectives under each possible response (Snyder, loc. cit.).[2]

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Accordingly, if defensive capabilities must be directly employed, it may be assumed that deterrence has failed. This, in turn, raises the question of whether such a policy was formally articulated or merely de facto implemented, although this line of inquiry falls beyond the scope of the present study. In other words, once defensive capabilities are used in a crisis situation, deterrence has already broken down—not only are the two concepts distinct, but, in this sense, they can also be understood as mutually exclusive.[3] This does not imply, however, that deterrence is not part of national defense policy in the broad, strategic sense. Having established precise distinctions between defense and deterrence, it is useful to add several remarks regarding different types of deterrence. Two primary distinctions can be identified: that between general (or "classic") and extended deterrence, and that between conventional and nuclear deterrence.[4]

Patrick Morgan also distinguishes between general and immediate deterrence, depending on whether deterrence is implemented in response to concrete knowledge of an adversary's current aggressive plans or based on a hypothetical threat from an unidentified attacker, with a preference for the latter (Morgan, 2003: xvi). While this line of discussion falls outside the immediate analytical scope of this study, it is worth noting that extended deterrence, as understood within the context of U.S. post–Cold War grand strategy, typically entails a combination of these approaches. Michael Mazarr further introduces a distinction between deterrence by denial and deterrence by punishment—namely, between increasing the immediate costs of a potential attack and threatening severe retaliation should an attack occur. According to Mazarr, since the former is primarily a function of capabilities and the latter of intentions, deterrence by denial is generally considered more effective (Mazarr, 2018: 8).

The first distinction concerns the referent object of security: in the case of classic deterrence, a state seeks to prevent potential attacks against its own territory, whereas in the case of extended deterrence, it also seeks to protect the territories of its allies. It is therefore evident why extended deterrence occupies a central place in this study: closely linked to phenomena such as military alliances, the distribution of power, and threat perception, it lies at the very foundation of understanding great power politics—and, by extension, global politics as a whole. The issue of the credibility of commitments is at the core of extended deterrence. Although a state commits to treating an attack against its ally or client as an attack against itself, the implicit

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assumption that foreign territory may be treated differently from its own remains ever present (Radojević, 2024).

In other words, while the existence of classic deterrence represents the norm (again, at least in practical if not always formal terms), extended deterrence as part of a political and security strategy is consistently treated as an exception—even when formally codified. Hence the argument that "extended deterrence has always been a far more demanding task than deterrence itself" (Delpech, 2012: 29). A state seeking to deter a potential attack against a client has four strategic options at its disposal: a conventional defense pact, the deployment of conventional forces, a nuclear defense pact, or the deployment of nuclear forces. The choice among these instruments will largely depend on two variables: the type of threat faced by the client and the likelihood of a rapid enemy victory in a conflict with that client (Lee, 2021: 762).

The second distinction concerns the means of deterrence: the type of deterrence is determined by whether its principal instrument consists of conventional or nuclear military capabilities.[5] The present analysis focuses primarily on the military dimension of deterrence policy. Naturally, in the contemporary era, indirect means of deterrence may also include non-military instruments based on geographic, economic, cultural, or societal resilience factors; however, the logic of their use should remain consistent with the military dimension as the foundation of national security.

This dichotomy may be regarded as the most consequential, given the unique status of nuclear weapons within both military doctrines and international politics more broadly. In a conventional conflict, "cost is a function of military casualties, lost or damaged equipment, civilian casualties resulting from combat, and the costs of mobilization, deployment, and sustainment of forces" (Mearsheimer, 1985: 23). While such costs may vary in magnitude and scope, only in rare and difficult-to-imagine circumstances do they carry the risk of total physical and biological destruction.

On the other hand, the destructive power of nuclear weapons—particularly in cases of indiscriminate use—ultimately carries the potential to produce irreversible consequences for the affected state and its society, including the possibility of biological extinction or the rendering of life unsustainable for large numbers of future generations. A large-scale nuclear conflict could generate such consequences at the level of the entire, or nearly the entire, international system.

Given that these represent the most severe conceivable outcomes that actors in a political crisis or conflict could face, it is generally assumed that the use of nuclear capabilities will be approached with far greater caution or hesitation than is the case with conventional forces. For this reason, authors such as Bernard Brodie and Herman Kahn regarded nuclear weapons—despite their imperfections and inherent risks—as the ultimate instrument of deterrence (Brodie, 1946; Kahn, 1960).

The credibility of a nuclear response to a potential attack lies at the core of this strategy's effectiveness. At the same time, the signaling of intent is typically conducted in a manner of "calculated ambiguity," so as not only to convey the prospect of retalia-

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tion to the opposing side but also to leave sufficient room for it to abandon offensive intentions in a timely manner (Pejić, 2024: 9–10; Coleman & Siracusa, 2006: x, 46, 116).

To reiterate, within the context of U.S. grand strategy during—and especially after—the Cold War, extended deterrence represents an indispensable instrument of both security and foreign policy. The fact that the network of alliances through which extended deterrence was implemented during the bipolar structure of the Cold War international system has not been substantially revised even under the conditions of radically altered polarity following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Morgan, 2003) constitutes both a political and analytical curiosity. As such, it occupies a central place in contemporary foreign policy debates within the U.S. political and academic communities.

Extended Deterrence in U.S. Foreign and Security Policy

As Vesna Danilović aptly observes, during the period of Cold War "unrestrained globalism" in American strategic thought, the question of whether—and what kind of—national interests the United States had in different parts of the world was generally not raised. Instead, American strategists viewed deterrence primarily through the lens of military capabilities and credibility, out of concern that failure in one region might produce negative consequences in others (Danilović, 2005: 3–4). This approach lay at the core of the strategy of containment, with its most well-known manifestation being the so-called domino theory, which guided U.S. efforts to counter international communism and shaped its approach to the Vietnam War.

In this context, extended deterrence represents a strategic approach in which the United States employs military—and particularly nuclear—capabilities to protect its allies from potential or imminent aggression, by threatening the adversary with serious consequences should it attack those states. Unlike traditional deterrence (which, as previously noted, concerns the protection of a state's own territory), extended deterrence guarantees security to other states as well, thereby—at least from the perspective of foreign policy decision-makers—protecting allies and maintaining stability in global relations.

During the Cold War, this policy was central to the U.S. strategic posture toward the Soviet Union and its allies, particularly in Europe through NATO and in Asia through alliances with countries such as South Korea and Japan (Roehrig, 2017: 13; Rynning, 2005). The primary aim of extended deterrence was to discourage the Soviet Union from launching attacks or expanding its sphere of influence by clearly signaling that any attack on U.S. allies would be treated as an attack on the United States itself, with all attendant consequences, including a potential nuclear response.

For its part, the Soviet Union, through the use of its nuclear umbrella, implemented its own version of extended deterrence vis-à-vis the countries of the Warsaw Pact, although this version was more centralized and less formalized than that practiced by the United States (Gnauck, 2006).

Thus conceived, extended deterrence fulfilled multiple functions: it was intended to strengthen allies' confidence that they would not face threats alone, reduce their incentives to develop independent nuclear arsenals, and secure U.S. strategic advantage and political influence in key global regions. Extended deterrence also served as a mechanism for maintaining a delicate balance between credible threat and the avoidance of escalation, which was crucial for preserving peace and preventing direct armed confrontation between the superpowers. Ultimately, through extended deterrence, the United States was able to sustain a security architecture based on collective defense (within the Western bloc) and nuclear balance (at the global level), both of which constituted key pillars of overall systemic stability throughout the Cold War.

As previously indicated, nuclear weapons have traditionally played a central role in the U.S. concept of extended deterrence: the United States reserves the right to use nuclear weapons in defense of its allies, not solely for the protection of its own territory. The core components of this approach—beyond the necessity of possessing nuclear capabilities, or at least the credible perception of their existence—include the normative foundations, doctrinal formulation, and communicative presentation of extended deterrence.

In cases where the United States commits to deterring—and, if necessary, retaliating against—attacks on allies covered by formal security guarantees through the use of its nuclear arsenal, the normative basis is grounded in international agreements such as the North Atlantic Treaty (1949), the Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Republic of Korea (1953), and the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan (1960). In the case of Australia and New Zealand, the provisions of the ANZUS agreement (Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty, 1951) were formulated more flexibly, while U.S. commitments toward New Zealand were effectively suspended in the mid-1980s due to strong domestic anti-nuclear sentiment.

The principal instrument for the doctrinal articulation of U.S. extended deterrence policy is the Nuclear Posture Review, most recently adopted in 2022 under the administration of Joseph R. Biden. According to this foundational document of U.S. nuclear strategy, the primary role of nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attacks against the United States, its allies, and its partners (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022: 1, 9).[6] NATO maintains its own Deterrence and Defence Posture Review, last adopted in 2012, although it is considerably less comprehensive than the U.S. unilateral document (see NATO, 2012). U.S. nuclear doctrine does not incorporate a no-first-use pledge; rather, the possibility of nuclear use is retained in response to strategic non-nuclear attacks—for example, the use of chemical, biological, or other weapons of mass destruction—as well as in response to conventional operations that threaten the vital interests of the United States or its allies (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022: 9).

With regard to the communicative presentation of U.S. extended deterrence policy—particularly in the context of its nuclear component—it remains predominantly grounded in the concept of strategic or deliberate ambiguity. In the case of the United States, there is no ambiguity regarding the existence of nuclear weapons; however,

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the U.S. consistently refrains from disclosing, for instance, which specific vessel within one of its seven naval fleets is equipped with nuclear armaments. The logic of this approach lies in implicitly increasing the perceived risk of any potential attack against the United States, its partners, and its allies, thereby contributing—ultimately—to the avoidance of direct armed conflict.

Accordingly, an important aspect not only of this component but of U.S. extended deterrence policy as a whole is its material basis: dual-capable aircraft permanently deployed in Europe and Asia, and, when necessary, in Middle Eastern bases (Milosavljević & Blagojević, 2024); nuclear submarines and strategic bombers engaged in continuous global patrols; as well as nuclear weapons stationed in Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, and Turkey.

It is, of course, understood that this material structure, as well as the strategic logic underpinning this model of extended deterrence, originates from a specific historical context: one defined by deep structural divisions, competition, and latent global conflict shaped by the policies of the two superpowers during the Cold War. The post–Cold War period, however, brought about a dramatically different context in terms of the distribution of power, as the "unipolar moment" introduced new threat perceptions and a different logic of strategic thinking.

Subsequently, efforts were made to adapt extended deterrence to emerging challenges such as terrorism and cyber warfare, while preserving its central role within a U.S. grand strategy aimed at maintaining its newly established dominant position in the international system. Despite the absence of a single global rival comparable to the Soviet Union, by the end of the twentieth century it had become evident that various actors had an interest in contesting U.S. hegemony and the unilateralism that accompanied it. In this context, extended deterrence was expected to serve as a tool for constraining so-called revisionist actors, while also pursuing instrumental objectives such as strengthening the confidence of allies, partners, and client states, and preventing nuclear proliferation.

Europe has remained one of the focal regions of U.S. foreign policy. However, the post–Cold War transformation of the European security environment—including NATO enlargement and the consequent rise in Russian assertiveness (Rynning, 2025: 264–268), alongside calls for greater European strategic autonomy and growing tensions within the alliance—has underscored the need for a debate on redefining U.S. commitments and its overall strategic posture (Lišanin, 2021: 147).

This debate reflects deep political, theoretical, and even sociocultural divisions within contemporary American society, while at the same time providing insight into both the actual and potential trajectories of U.S. strategic thought in general, and extended deterrence in particular. Different schools of thought carry varying weight and significance within the evolving historical context. These changes are simultaneously—and seemingly paradoxically—both a cause and a function of shifts in U.S. administrations in the twenty-first century. By the mid-2020s, they appear more dynamic than at any point since the end of the Cold War.

Against the Consensus: The Strategy of Restraint and Its Opponents

At the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, during the second administration of William J. Clinton and the two administrations of George W. Bush, it appeared that a consensus existed within the U.S. foreign policy establishment regarding the necessity of preserving a strategy of primacy, deep engagement, or liberal hegemony. This strategy entailed a comprehensive presence across nearly all global regions, including, where deemed necessary, the extensive use of military force.

The unipolar moment—shaped to a significant extent by the context of the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia—produced a seemingly atypical and counterintuitive coalition of liberal internationalists and neoconservatives. This coalition embodied a position fundamentally opposed to the grand strategy of restraint as defined in the introductory section. Informal and often deeply divided on issues of domestic policy, it nevertheless converged on support for an active global role for the United States, pursued through interventionism and extended deterrence as one of its key components.

The concrete forms of political articulation offered by neoconservatism and liberal internationalism differed—primarily at the level of rhetoric—particularly regarding the importance of international norms and the value of multilateralism. However, both perspectives reflected the broader post–Cold War spirit characterized by confidence in the superiority of the American political model and the values upon which it is based, as well as an ambition to expand them across the entire international system.

Both liberal internationalists and neoconservatives oppose the strategy of restraint and any U.S. withdrawal from global affairs. The former view liberal hegemony as the most effective means of preserving a "rules-based order" that favors the United States due to its economic, technological, cultural, and military superiority (Korać, 2025: 182–183). The latter regard deep engagement as the most effective way to contain the ambitions of U.S. rivals and as a pathway to fulfilling the mission of the United States as an exceptional, chosen nation.

From an anthropological perspective, these positions represent the optimistic and pessimistic sides of the same coin, with similar—if not identical—foreign policy implications. Restraint and offshore balancing—strategies formulated primarily, though not exclusively, by authors associated with realist approaches to international politics—advocate a limited U.S. engagement abroad. They emphasize the protection of vital national interests rather than the pursuit of global hegemony and oppose the interventionist impulses that have traditionally shaped U.S. foreign policy, particularly in the post–Cold War era.

At the ideological level, especially following a series of unsuccessful international interventions during the administrations of William J. Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack H. Obama, a growing number of theorists and policymakers—both from the conservative right and the progressive left—have called for a revision of the prevailing strategic approach. Miranda Priebe and her colleagues identify three main strands within the thinking on restraint—realist, conservative, and progressive—dis-

tinguished by their underlying assumptions, definitions of U.S. interests, and perceptions of threats (Priebe et al., 2024: 141–143). What unites these perspectives is the assessment that, under current conditions, the United States would benefit more from limiting its military engagement in global affairs than from maintaining its existing level of involvement.

As noted in the introductory section, the first significant impulses toward a strategy of restraint within the American academic community emerged during the "unipolar moment" of the late twentieth century. Among the most notable expressions of this view was the call by Eugene Gholz and his co-authors for America to "come home," articulated in a 1997 article in the journal International Security. At the outset of Clinton's second administration, they advocated military restraint, understood as a reduction of the U.S. global security presence while preserving an active role in international affairs, particularly in trade, and avoiding a turn toward economic protectionism. They argued that "there is little reason to believe that withdrawal from Europe and Asia would lead to deterrence failure. With or without a forward U.S. presence, American allies possess sufficient military capability to deter any potential aggressor" (Gholz et al., 1997: 31).

A specific variant of withdrawal—or, more precisely, a reduction of overseas military presence—is represented by the strategy of offshore balancing, initially articulated by Christopher Layne in a 1997 article. This approach entails focusing U.S. strategic attention on three regions of vital importance—Europe, the Persian Gulf, and Northeast Asia—while relying primarily on regional partners. Direct military intervention would be reserved as a last resort, implicitly embedded in security calculations through instruments of extended deterrence (Layne, 1997: 94–95).

In a 2015 article, Stephen Walt argued against U.S. arms transfers to Ukraine, maintaining that the deterrence model was not appropriately applicable to the Russo-Ukrainian crisis and that such a policy could, in fact, contribute to conflict escalation according to the "spiral model" (Walt, 2015; Kopanja & Ajzenhamer, 2022).[7] This model suggests that, contrary to deterrence theory—which assumes that military strengthening discourages potential aggressors—the buildup of military capabilities by a target state may instead provoke fear and anxiety in the opposing side, thereby increasing the likelihood of armed conflict.

In a similar vein, a few years later, Walt argued that the United States should "close the nuclear umbrella" and suspend this form of extended deterrence in both Europe and Asia (Walt, 2021; Larsen, 2015).

In a 2012 study—whose title directly echoes the 1997 article by Gholz and his co-authors—Michael Brooks, William Wohlforth, and G. John Ikenberry argue that America should not "come home" and offer a comprehensive analysis of the costs and benefits of a strategy of deep engagement. Their approach combines elements of both realist and liberal theoretical frameworks. While acknowledging the downsides and risks associated with the existing U.S. strategy, they contend that the uncertainty

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generated by a reduction in America's role in world politics—including security guarantees to allies through both formal and informal arrangements—would pose a more serious threat to vital U.S. interests (Brooks, Ikenberry, & Wohlforth, 2012).

Ikenberry advances similar arguments in a later study, maintaining that U.S. primacy remains the most effective means of preserving international order and that this objective should be pursued through a redefined form of liberal internationalism adapted to contemporary challenges (Ikenberry, 2020). Posen offers a contrasting perspective: "European members of NATO, as well as members of the European Union, collectively have a much larger population and significantly greater GDP than Russia. In addition, they enjoy a favorable geographic position relative to Russia, whose access to the seas has been constrained by European powers in the Mediterranean, the Baltic, the northern Norwegian Sea, and the Atlantic Ocean. Two European NATO members, the United Kingdom and France, possess nuclear weapons. A decision by Russia to go to war against a European coalition would be extremely serious. Nuclear weapons on both sides render attempts to resolve such a war through decisive offensives mutually suicidal. Moreover, a prolonged war of attrition would inflict severe damage on the Russian economy and, ironically, turn Russia into a vassal state of China—hardly a nationalist success for President Vladimir Putin or his successor. Europe can credibly deter Russian aggression by threatening to wage such a war. That threat is credible if Russia cannot achieve a quick victory" (Posen, 2020: 17). In other words, conventional (rather than extended) deterrence constitutes a sufficient basis for moving toward European strategic autonomy.

From a predominantly realist standpoint, Michael Brooks and Hugo Meijer respond to these arguments by asserting that a U.S. withdrawal would undermine European security and that efforts to achieve strategic autonomy would be constrained by two major limitations: "deep deficiencies in defense capabilities that will be difficult to overcome, and 'strategic cacophony,' that is, profound continental differences across all areas of national defense policy, particularly in threat perceptions" (Brooks & Meijer, 2021: 17).

Posen concludes the debate by arguing that even where objective constraints exist, they are not of such magnitude as to prevent the achievement of effective strategic autonomy in the event of a U.S. security withdrawal from Europe (Posen, 2021: 43–45).

From a progressive-left perspective, Stephen Wertheim contends that U.S. security retrenchment from Europe is vital not only for the United States but, above all, for Europe itself:

"A redivision of transatlantic labor is the only way to secure Europe's basic defense needs, alleviate some of the tensions straining relations, and allow shared interests to come back to the forefront. For Europeans accustomed to living under American protection, change may be disorienting. Yet the United States has, in fact, not defended Europe for an entire generation. The alliance has nothing to lose but its illusions" (Wertheim, 2025: 50).

David Milne illustrates the neoliberal–neoconservative convergence with a remark concerning the period of Clinton's second administration: "Wolfowitz[8] supported Albright's[9] views, noting that she 'represents the best instincts of this administration in foreign policy.' Indeed, the Clinton administration appeared to closely follow the recommendations outlined in the controversial 1992 Defense Planning Guidance (DPG)." [10]Paul Wolfowitz—a leading neoconservative thinker and policymaker, who served as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy during the administration of George H. W. Bush and later as Deputy Secretary of Defense under George W. Bush—and Madeleine Albright, who served as Secretary of State in Clinton's second administration, represent clear personifications of neoconservative and liberal internationalist worldviews, respectively. Their personal and political convergence thus serves as a compelling illustration of this seemingly atypical ideological alignment.

A similar overlap in values and policy preferences is identified by Stephen Walt, who notes that, in the early twenty-first century, liberals such as Michael McFaul and neoconservatives such as William Kristol and Lawrence Kaplan wrote with enthusiasm about American military dominance and the use of force in global affairs. From a more pessimistic perspective, the logic of extended deterrence—upon which much of the Cold War global security architecture had been based—became hypertrophied in the post–Cold War era. The protection of vital national and allied security interests was no longer the primary determinant in decisions regarding the use of force. Instead, any potential failure by Washington to intervene militarily in international crises was framed as a blow to U.S. credibility, which, in turn, was argued to undermine the effectiveness of extended deterrence. In this way, a self-reinforcing cycle of military interventionism emerged—one that was partially disrupted for the first time after the Cold War during the first administration of Donald J. Trump.

Nevertheless, Michael Hirsh observes a convergence between positions traditionally separated by deep divisions within the American political spectrum. This convergence appears to be moving toward a more realist understanding of global politics, accompanied by an increasing emphasis on restraint as a key strategic implication. This trend is particularly evident among a younger generation of foreign policy strategists and analysts: "Both sides are grappling with the idea that the United States must remain the dominant global power—just not to the extent it has been. One key term is 'restraint': a dramatic reduction of America's global ambitions and a renewed focus on domestic priorities in a world that both sides now recognize as multipolar. Another important concept is the 'prioritization' of U.S. interests, reflecting a growing acknowledgment that Washington is overstretched and must scale back its commitments, particularly in Europe and the Middle East" (Hirsh, 2025).

Although, aside from brief historical episodes, U.S. grand strategy has never been fully situated at either extreme, American debates have traditionally unfolded along

8 *Paul Wolfowitz*, a leading neoconservative thinker and policymaker, who served as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy during the administration of George H. W. Bush and later as Deputy Secretary of Defense under George W. Bush

9 *Madeleine Albright* served as Secretary of State in Clinton's second administration.

10 Defence Planning Guidance, a controversial document from the George H. W. Bush administration, authored by Wolfowitz and his assistant I. Lewis Scoote Libby, stipulated that the United States should preserve its own supremacy in global politics at all costs and by using all means.

the continuum between internationalism and isolationism (Wertheim, 2025; Dombrowski & Reich, 2025: 65). Having reached a peak of internationalism at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the pendulum now appears to be swinging in the opposite direction.

Conclusion: Prospects for U.S. Extended Deterrence Policy

Although debates over reducing the U.S. security presence in Europe—and, within that context, over the policy of extended deterrence—are as old as the institutionalization of transatlantic relations itself, they have, as shown, intensified significantly over the past decade. The second presidential term of Donald Trump has served as a particularly important catalyst in this regard. On the eve of Trump's second term, Mitch McConnell, a senator from Kentucky and Republican leader in the Senate, argued in the pages of Foreign Affairs that the United States should reject isolationist impulses and "embrace primacy" (McConnell, 2024). In the debate that followed, Reid Smith contended that the costs of a strategy of primacy are too high, arguing that "unsustainable spending and rising debt undermine the foundations of economic power on which U.S. strength rests," while "overextension leads to decline" (Smith, 2025).

The first half of Trump's second term has not been marked by radical proposals to abandon or dismantle NATO, as was the case during his first term; however, the instinct toward continuous reassessment of relations with allies and clients persists. Given its position in the international system, as well as the network of global interests developed over more than a century, the United States does not have the luxury of abruptly and completely withdrawing from world affairs. The most recent escalation of tensions between Israel and Iran, which culminated in open armed conflict in the summer of 2025—with the involvement of the United States—has further reinforced the relevance and urgency of debates over U.S. global security engagement, including deterrence policy as its central component.

To reiterate, the fundamental purpose of deterrence policy is precisely to ensure that defensive capabilities—whether one's own or those of allies and clients—do not have to be employed. In other words, once defensive capabilities are operationally engaged, it is likely that armed conflict has already begun, indicating that the threat of force as a means of deterrence was neither effective nor efficient. In such cases, deterrence must be considered unsuccessful. In this sense, it is evident that the United States is likely to be more successful in conventional (direct) deterrence than in extended deterrence. However, the potential negative implications of this reality may be mitigated through the prioritization of vital U.S. interests and a rethinking of its international military-security engagement.

The role of nuclear weapons remains an exceptionally important determinant in shaping U.S. extended deterrence policy (Acton, 2010; Sagan, 2010). According to Stephen Walt, in the post–Cold War era nuclear deterrence has, in fact, been the only genuine form of deterrence, whereas U.S. conventional military power—and the primacy strategy based upon it—has been used "not primarily to deter dangerous ad-

versaries from attacking the United States and its vital interests," but rather to "shape the international environment in accordance with U.S. preferences, overthrow authoritarian leaders opposed to Washington, or promote other broadly defined liberal objectives" (Walt, 2018: 63–64).

Elbridge Colby, a scholar and senior defense planning official who has held key positions in both administrations of Donald Trump, identifies a central aporia facing Washington in the nuclear dimension of extended deterrence:

"The logic of deterrence dictates that U.S. defense strategy toward new great-power rivals must balance two competing requirements: any measures Washington threatens must be severe enough to coerce an adversary, but not so catastrophic as to lack credibility. For the United States, striking this balance is not easy. A country defending its own territory can plausibly convince adversaries that it would risk nuclear destruction to avoid foreign occupation. But for Washington, which seeks to help defend distant allies against aggression, such threats are far less credible. As one U.S. official quoted former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger: 'Great powers do not commit suicide for their allies'" (Colby, 2018).

The question of limits on nuclear capabilities, along with the related issue of nuclear proliferation (Rose, 2025), represents a central point of contention in U.S. extended deterrence policy, with analysts and policymakers far from reaching a consensus. Current trends point toward the preservation—and potentially the expansion—of existing nuclear capabilities:"Given the emergence of new threats, diverse regional security environments, and the persistent challenges associated with relying on nuclear weapons for deterrence, it is not possible to determine with certainty a static level of nuclear forces that would simultaneously fulfill all required missions. Nevertheless, it appears likely that reductions in U.S. nuclear forces would make the accomplishment of those missions more difficult" (Trachtenberg, 2012: 88).

Although the United States is undoubtedly experiencing relative decline vis-à-vis its principal challengers, Washington will continue to play a decisive role in shaping the ultimate outcomes of ongoing transformations in the global system (O'Neil, 2013; Trailović, 2024; Kostić-Šulejić, 2023; Obrenović, 2024; Igrutinović, 2024; Stekić, 2025). A reconceptualization of U.S. extended deterrence policy—one that signals a renunciation of truly global ambitions—could, perhaps paradoxically, strengthen the United States' international position within an emerging, far more diffuse international system.

For many traditional U.S. allies and clients, however, such a shift would entail turning toward new forms of internal or external balancing, without any guarantees of success. It is likely that, in the medium term, extended deterrence will become one of the most significantly transformed elements of U.S. grand strategy.

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S u m m a r y

This paper analyzes debates on extended deterrence within the contemporary American scholarly community, with particular emphasis on the evolution of U.S. strategy after the Cold War. The end of the bipolar order and the dissolution of the Soviet Union led to the dominance of liberal internationalism and the strategy of primacy, characterized by extensive global engagement of the United States and the absence of clear prioritization in foreign and security policy. Extended deterrence, as a key instrument of liberal hegemony, became a central component of U.S. strategy, but also a subject of ongoing academic and political debate. The author draws a clear distinction between conventional and extended deterrence, as well as between conventional and nuclear deterrence, emphasizing that the credibility of U.S. commitments to allies has always been difficult to sustain, particularly in the context of nuclear weapons and global alliance networks.

During the Cold War, extended deterrence was primarily aimed at containing the Soviet Union and strengthening allied confidence, while in the post-Cold War period efforts were made to adapt this strategy to new challenges, such as terrorism and cyber threats. Europe has remained a focal point of U.S. policy; however, NATO enlargement, increasing Russian assertiveness, and calls for European strategic autonomy have opened new debates regarding the scope and nature of American security guarantees. Within the American academic and political community, two dominant camps have emerged: advocates of primacy, who emphasize the preservation of the United States' global role, and proponents of restraint, who argue for reducing external commitments and focusing on vital national interests.

The strategy of restraint has gained prominence following a series of unsuccessful interventions and in the context of an increasingly multipolar world, with its proponents arguing that limited engagement would yield more benefits than costs. Conversely, critics of restraint warn of risks to global stability and the credibility of alliance commitments. The debate has intensified particularly during the second term of Donald Trump, which, although not radically, has shifted the focus toward revising relations with allies and reassessing the long-term sustainability of extended deterrence. The role of nuclear weapons remains central, but questions remain regarding the credibility of U.S. nuclear threats in defense of distant allies.

Keywords: *United States, foreign policy, national security, liberal hegemony, primacy strategy, restraint strategy, extended deterrence, realism*