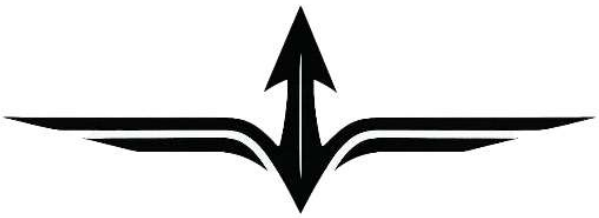
CHAPTER 1



The Edge that Endures

James M. Minnich

"Peace, like freedom, is not a gift that tarries long in the hands of cowards, or of those too feeble or too short-sighted to deserve it."[2]

— Theodore Roosevelt
then Assistant Secretary of the Navy (1897)

American advantage has never been a birthright. It was built, again and again, by acting sooner, reaching farther, and deciding faster than rivals. In 1944 alone, U.S. factories produced an average of 8,485 aircraft each month; an industrial feat that no adversary could match.[3] Nearly a century and a half earlier, a young republic had dispatched frigates to the Mediterranean to defend its trade routes far from home.[4] These episodes, separated by generations, point to

a deeper pattern: America's edge has rested less on geography than on an instinct for outward engagement, treating distance not as a shield, but as a challenge to be overcome.

That instinct has defined U.S. strategy ever since. Freedom of navigation patrols in contested seas, expeditionary deployments across distant theaters, and the cultivation of forward-leaning alliances all embody the same ethos: presence over retreat, initiative over hesitation. America's edge, often razor-thin, always hard-won, has endured not through material abundance alone, but because it has adapted faster, projected power farther, and aligned national purpose more clearly than its competitors.

This chapter traces how that edge took shape, showing the habits and structures that made it durable. The book returns to three interlocking pillars that give those habits form—deterrence, lethality, and warrior ethos—but here the task is to establish the historical throughline that demonstrates their enduring necessity.

The contemporary strategic environment is defined neither by American collapse nor by uncontested primacy, but by the convergence of structural competition and compressed decision time. The United States remains a central stabilizing force where its interests and commitments are engaged, but it no longer underwrites global stability by default.[5] In such an environment, stability is no longer sustained automatically. It must be produced—deliberately, collectively, and at speed.

The logic of outward engagement was evident from the nation's earliest years. In the late 1790s, after creating a standing Navy amid threats to maritime commerce, American squadrons were already patrolling distant seas.[6] By the mid-19th century, continental

expansion fused with Pacific ambition, leading to deliberate efforts to secure a two-ocean future. The Lewis and Clark expedition sought a transcontinental link; the 1844 Treaty of Wangxia established a formal trade foothold in China.[7] A year later, President James K. Polk declared that a modern steam navy was "of vast importance as regards our safety." When war with Mexico erupted in 1846, he leveraged that nascent capability: ordering blockades on both the Gulf and Pacific coasts, stationing a permanent squadron off the coast of California, and pressing Congress to extend federal law and institutions to Oregon.[8] These actions—preemptive, pragmatic, and purposeful—reflected an early conviction that America's security and prosperity depended on reach, not retrenchment. Born of necessity, this strategic mindset became the enduring foundation of America's power.

War as Catalyst: The Rise of American Power

The United States began establishing a Pacific footprint long before the Spanish-American War. The Guano Islands Act of 1856 authorized claims to remote outposts, including Jarvis, Howland, Baker, Johnston, Midway, Wake, and American Samoa.[9] At first glance barren, these islands later proved indispensable as refueling, cable, and communications nodes—early evidence that strategic foresight often rested in places once seen as marginal.

The decisive turn came in 1898. That year's brief but transformative war with Spain reshaped the American position in the Pacific and resulted in the United States assuming authority in the Philippines, where Hawaii and Guam became part of an emerging network of Pacific positions. Brought under U.S.

administration in July, Hawaii became a mid-ocean hub for coaling, resupply, and naval operations. Representative Horace Snover (R–MI) described it as an extension of America's "line of defense 2,000 miles westward from the Pacific coast," a prescient articulation of forward defense.[10] Guam, which came under U.S. control later that year, linked Hawaii and Manila, its importance heightened by the Navy's limited steaming range. Planners soon regarded it as an indispensable "outpost of Hawaii in time of war."[11]

These geographic gains were reinforced by diplomacy. In 1899 and 1900, Secretary of State John Hay issued the Open Door Notes, asserting equal trading rights in China and the preservation of its territorial integrity. Though framed as diplomacy, the policy reflected the same logic as America's growing Pacific network: to prevent any single rival from establishing exclusive dominance in Asia. Together, Hawaii, Guam, the Philippines, and the Open Door signaled a clear U.S. intention to project not only power but principle—an order open to access and participation across the region.

This foundation endured. Even as Europe retrenched after World War I, the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922 codified the United States as a Pacific maritime power, granting parity with Britain and superiority over Japan under the 5:5:3 tonnage ratio.[12]

World War II made the logic undeniable. The attack on Pearl Harbor shattered illusions that distance equaled defense and unleashed a surge in American industrial and military capacity. Japan had gravely underestimated U.S. resolve and productive scale—a miscalculation that hastened its defeat.[13] As Alan S. Milward observes, "in terms of economic potential for war the

United States, even in depression, dominated all powers," maintaining unmatched industrial strength in key sectors, even though military expenditure in 1938 amounted to barely 1.5 percent of national product.[14] While Axis powers were already operating near full capacity, the United States still possessed vast, untapped reserves that could be mobilized at speed and scale no rival could match. By 1944, U.S. shipyards were launching Liberty ships at a pace measured in days,[15] sustaining an "iron highway" from Pearl Harbor to Ulithi to Leyte that turned distance itself into an instrument of power.[16]

The war crystallized enduring principles: forward presence and sea control as essential to deterrence, industrial capacity as the foundation of lethality, and coalition warfare as a decisive force multiplier. As Michael Green observes in *By More Than Providence*, U.S. primacy "did not emerge by providence alone" but from the deliberate application of military, diplomatic, economic, and ideational power; underwritten by a conviction that the United States would not tolerate hegemonic control over Asia or the Pacific.[17]

This tradition of outward engagement was never indiscriminate or unbound. It reflected a judgment, repeated across generations, that distance could be mitigated when core interests were at stake, not an assumption that every crisis demanded American intervention.

The perimeter built in those years, from Hawaii and Guam to Okinawa and beyond, remains central to U.S. strategy. The instruments have changed, but the logic endures: America's edge

has always rested on adapting faster, projecting farther, and orchestrating power with greater coherence than any rival.

From Cold War Deterrence to Global Preeminence

The Cold War compelled the United States to construct its first truly global architecture of deterrence. Facing a Soviet adversary with continental reach, Washington fused nuclear credibility, alliance management, and forward presence into a coherent framework that prevented great-power war for nearly half a century. More than a reaction to communism, it institutionalized habits of engagement—global reach, allied assurance, and sustained readiness—that still shape U.S. statecraft today.

In the Indo-Pacific, this architecture gained particular urgency. Under United Nations (UN) authority, U.S.-led forces repelled the 1950 North Korean invasion, establishing a long-term presence in Japan and South Korea and extending nuclear guarantees that would become the cornerstone of regional stability. To anchor these commitments, Washington assembled a dense network of bilateral treaties—the Mutual Defense Treaties with the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan; ANZUS with Australia and New Zealand; and the U.S.–Japan Security Treaty—while SEATO briefly sought, without lasting effect, to extend this framework region-wide.[18] Together, these arrangements formalized forward defense, embedding America's presence and binding key partners into a durable security architecture.

Territorial administration deepened this reach. The post-1947 UN Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands provided the legal pathway for the establishment of the Northern Mariana Islands as a U.S.

commonwealth and to the Compacts of Free Association (COFA) with Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau.[19] These agreements, still in force, grant Washington defense responsibility and exclusive military access across a vast Pacific expanse from Guam to Kwajalein, creating a strategic depth no rival could replicate.

Sea control tied the system together. The dedicated Taiwan Strait Patrol (1950–1979),[20] sustained power projection from Guam and Japan,[21] and the Seventh Fleet's constant presence signaled that the United States was prepared to fight far from home. This was not improvisation. Effective deterrence required escalation dominance, tight alignment of political aims and military posture, and steady reassurance to dissuade allies from pursuing independent nuclear paths.[22]

By the end of the Cold War, the United States stood not only victorious but also unrivaled. Its reach, scale, and technological dominance appeared uncontested. Yet triumph bred complacency. Deprived of a peer competitor to impose discipline, Washington drifted, even as rising powers dissected the U.S.-led order, probed its seams, and prepared their own bids for influence.[23] What followed was not the extension of unipolar dominance, but the emergence of competitive multipolarity, driven above all by China's rapid ascent and Russia's resurgence.[24]

From Unipolar Dominance to Strategic Drift

The collapse of the Soviet Union left the United States with unrivaled power but an increasingly uncertain purpose. As defense analyst and former Senator Jim Talent (R-MO) observed, the

disappearance of a peer adversary produced a "lapse in the practice of linking force planning to articulated threats," allowing domestic politics and budget ceilings, rather than strategic necessity, to shape defense choices.[25] With no competitor to impose discipline, Washington's focus drifted from great-power rivalry to peacekeeping, humanitarian relief, and, after 9/11, counterterrorism.[26] U.S. forces remained globally deployed, but the strategic rigor that had long anchored the American posture began to erode.

The so-called "peace dividend" accelerated this drift. Four Base Realignment and Closure Program (BRAC) rounds between 1988 and 1995 shuttered dozens of installations;[27] procurement slowed even as costs escalated; and the defense industrial base consolidated around a few dominant prime contractors.[28] After 9/11, wartime surges in spending were absorbed by operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and by maintenance of aging systems, a choice that sustained current wars at the expense of preparing for future, high-end conflict.[29]

Rivals used this window to prepare. China invested heavily in anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities, a systems approach designed to deny adversaries freedom of maneuver. Rather than contesting U.S. forces ship-to-ship or plane-to-plane, Beijing built integrated networks of sensors, precision long-range fires, cyber tools, and space capabilities to disrupt U.S. command and control and sustainment; in effect, breaking America's "kill chains."[30] As Christian Brose observes, these investments aim to shape the battlefield by undermining the assumptions that underwrite U.S. power projection.[31] Collectively, this "counter-

intervention" force is intended to push U.S. forces off Asia's frontiers.[32]

Russia, meanwhile, rebuilt its undersea fleet and refined its information operations,[33] while Iran and North Korea honed asymmetric tools that exploited U.S. reliance on forward bases and extended logistics.[34] What many in Washington mistook for the "end of history" was, in fact, an opening, one that competitors seized to set the conditions for renewed great-power rivalry.[35]

Strategic Drift and the Rise of Rivals

The unipolar moment bred complacency that transcended administrations, ideologies, and institutions. As John Podesta, Lawrence Korb, and Brian Katulis warned, Washington's fixation on counterterrorism and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan produced "strategic drift." Modernization slowed, recruiting and retention strained, and force planning diverged from emerging threats.[36] The United States globalized its economy and waged the Global War on Terror, while competitors recalibrated for renewed great-power rivalry. Alliances aged, institutions struggled to adapt to new strategic demands, and adversaries adapted faster.[37]

Nowhere was this transformation clearer than in the Indo-Pacific. China undertook a deliberate breakout, constructing artificial islands, fielding a true blue-water navy,[38] and pairing Belt and Road initiatives with a more assertive regional posture.[39] Russia, emerging from its post-Soviet period, reasserted itself through combined exercises with China and modernized undersea and long-range strike forces designed to complicate U.S. naval dominance.[40]

Amid this flux, middle powers discovered new agency.[41] India pursued "strategic autonomy," deepening engagement with the Quad and co-developing systems with Washington even as it maintained defense ties with Moscow.[42] Vietnam expanded its navy and increased cooperation with the United States to hedge against China while managing relations with Beijing.[43] Indonesia, ASEAN's demographic and diplomatic anchor, asserted sovereignty and influence in regional forums without exclusive alignment.[44]

By the early 2000s, America's edge, once assumed, was contested on multiple fronts: assertive rivals, adaptive middle powers, and aging institutions. Meeting this moment required not just greater resources but renewed strategic discipline, clear priorities, and a willingness to rethink the assumptions of the unipolar era.

Competitive Multipolarity: A Stacked Era of Strategic Rivalry

Competitive multipolarity is not simply a descriptive label; it is a structural condition with operational consequences. It multiplies the number of actors capable of shaping outcomes, compresses decision timelines, and erodes the stabilizing assumptions that once governed escalation and crisis management.[45] In this environment, miscalculation becomes the dominant source of risk, and deterrence depends less on static superiority than on acting, adapting, and outpacing competitors' expectations.[46]

Analysts continue to debate how best to characterize the emerging international order as the post-Cold War recedes. Some

describe a drift toward loose or partial bipolarity centered on U.S.–China rivalry (Yan Xuetong;[47] Hal Brands and Michael Beckley[48]), while others emphasize a fragmented, multiplex system increasingly shaped by capable regional powers (Amitav Acharya;[49] Emma Ashford[50]). Still others foresee the rise of nonpolarity, with influence diffused among an increasingly diverse array of state and non-state actors.[51] Whatever the terminology, the direction is unmistakable: the post–Cold War anomaly of unipolar dominance is fading, yielding to a more crowded, dynamic, and contested world. As Secretary of State Marco Rubio observed in January 2025, "It's not normal for the world to simply have a unipolar power…eventually you were going to reach back to a point where you had a multipolar world."[52]

This volume adopts the term *competitive multipolarity* to capture that reality, an overarching condition within which power is unevenly distributed and regionally differentiated. It is an era defined by China's assertive ascent, Russia's disruptive persistence, and the growing agency of regional powers. China remains the foremost challenger, fusing commercial and defense innovation through military-civil integration to accelerate advances in shipbuilding, precision strike, space systems, and artificial intelligence.[53] Russia, though constrained by sanctions, economic strain,[54] and demographic decline,[55] continues to unsettle norms through nuclear signaling,[56] energy leverage,[57] cyber intrusions, and undersea modernization, often in quiet alignment with Beijing on issues of strategic consequence.

Yet this is no return to Cold War bipolarity. The terrain is more fluid, increasingly shaped by middle powers asserting strategic autonomy. India exemplifies this balance, deepening cooperation

with the Quad and co-developing systems with the United States while maintaining ties with Moscow.[58] Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam are modernizing their maritime defenses, strengthening their engagements with Washington, and leveraging ambiguity to safeguard their sovereignty without binding alliances.[59]

The United States is adapting its architecture to this new environment. AUKUS is driving deep integration across undersea systems, cyber capabilities, quantum computing, and AI.[60] The Partnership for Indo-Pacific Industrial Resilience (PIPIR), launched in 2024, is building a trusted ecosystem for co-production, sustainment, and supply-chain resilience, with projects already underway, including standards for unmanned systems and P-8 radar sustainment in Australia.[61] The Quad advances coordination in maritime awareness and technology governance, while U.S. partnerships with the EU, NATO, and plurilateral regimes extend network advantage into semiconductors, AI norms, and intellectual property protections.

Competitive multipolarity is not a passing phase; it is the structural condition of our time.[62] It blurs the boundary between peace and conflict, elevates miscalculation as the dominant source of risk, and places a premium on speed, cohesion, and endurance over static advantage. In such an environment, deterrence, lethality, and warrior ethos cannot stand apart. They must operate together, mutually reinforcing pillars of a strategy designed not merely to withstand turbulence, but to set conditions that deny domination, deter aggression, and preserve a favorable balance of power.

In a contested century, America's strategic edge cannot be understood as dominance without resistance or superiority without cost. It is measured instead by the capacity to deter conflict, deny coercion, and sustain advantage under pressure, alongside allies and partners, across time rather than moments of crisis. Deterrence, lethality, and warrior ethos are not separate lines of effort in this environment; they form a reinforcing logic of power that determines whether competition is managed or allowed to escalate into catastrophe.

What Constitutes a Strategic Edge: Why It Matters Now

America's enduring advantage has never rested solely on size or spending. Its true edge lies in shaping conditions faster than competitors can adapt; through an interplay of credible power, adaptive leadership, and resilient alliances sustained by clarity of purpose and consistent investment.

The question today is whether the United States can still surge—economically, industrially, and strategically—when urgency demands it. The answer is mixed. The nation remains a $31.8 trillion economy with deep capital markets,[63] world-class semiconductor design,[64] and a revitalized advanced manufacturing base.[65] Yet critical chokepoints persist across the defense industrial base—from single-source munitions suppliers[66] and aging nuclear shipyards[67] to stockpiles thinned by global commitments.[68] Recent reforms, most notably Executive Order 14265 and the Department of War's *Acquisition Transformation Strategy*[69] (the former Department of Defense[70]), represent the first attempts to place industrial readiness

and acquisition speed on a deliberate warfighting footing—but their effects will take time to materialize.

As Patrick McGee observes in *Apple in China*, even the world's most valuable company operates under the shadow of dependency: "The Chinese government is in a position to make Apple's diversification efforts painful. 'They can lower the boom on you in a million different ways…like raw materials—they can shut that off in a heartbeat… Electricity—all of a sudden it's only available four hours a day.'"[71] The warning extends far beyond Apple. What appears as commercial interdependence can quickly become strategic leverage. Supply-chain concentration is not merely an economic weakness; it is a strategic vulnerability. Interdependence without resilience becomes an instrument of coercion.

The Department of War has itself highlighted deep weaknesses across critical sectors: "fragile suppliers, sole-source dependencies, foreign sourcing, limited supply chain visibility, outdated government guidance, and limited demand" across critical defense sectors—most acutely in munitions, shipbuilding, and microelectronics—at levels far exceeding what it deemed acceptable a decade ago.[72] The FY 2021 *Industrial Capabilities Report to Congress* warned that because there is no "commercial market for missiles," defense demand alone cannot sustain the component production lines on which national security depends. Without deliberate policy intervention, fragile supply chains—from chemicals used in propellants and explosives to castings, forgings, and microelectronics—face the risk of cascading failure in any sustained contingency.[73]

Many of the most acute vulnerabilities lie deep in the lower-tier industrial base,[74] where a single firm may provide an indispensable component with no viable substitute. John Ferrari, former Army G-8 Director of Program Analysis and Evaluation, has cautioned that decades of consolidation and chronic underinvestment have "left the Pentagon without the ability to procure at scale the goods and services it needs to fight a major war."[75] Dan Wang's analysis in *Breakneck* reinforces this concern, noting that "the world is more dangerous if Beijing believes that the United States has insufficient ships and munitions to respond to an aggressive act against Taiwan or in the South China Sea."[76]

Taken together, these assessments underscore a fundamental truth: deterrence begins on the factory floor.[77] The credibility of U.S. power rests as much on its capacity to produce as on its will to act.

Arthur Herman reminds us in *Freedom's Forge* that surge capacity is a matter of policy, not providence—built through predictable demand, distributed suppliers, and leaders who treat production lines as strategic assets.[78] Several remedies are underway, including multi-year procurement authorities, Defense Production Act Title III investments,[79] and Industrial Base Analysis and Sustainment funding,[80] which have begun to stabilize demand and expand capacity. Targeted initiatives—such as the Submarine Industrial Base program and shipyard recapitalization—are reviving lost competencies.[81] Yet true surge readiness will require more: durable demand signals, reliable access to critical minerals, a skilled workforce, and peacetime incentives that keep production lines warm.

Affordability adds a structural constraint. According to Congressional Budget Office projections, interest payments will soon surpass the defense discretionary budget and, within a decade, decisively exceed it.[82] Strategic reinvestment must therefore be paired with prioritization, institutional efficiency, and expanded burden-sharing, from Japan's increased host-nation support to Australia's submarine infrastructure[83] and Europe's semiconductor export measures.[84] Fiscal stability is no longer an accounting discipline; it is a measure of strategic credibility.

Industrial resilience will increasingly depend on multinational capacity. Under the Regional Sustainment Framework (RSF), publicly introduced in January 2024, the United States has begun distributing sustainment and production capacity to trusted allies.[85] The groundwork for the RSF was laid through purposeful naval diplomacy. In the early 2020s,[86] then-Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro toured allied shipyards across Asia, praising the "robust capabilities of Indian shipyards," and initiating repair-expansion talks in Japan and South Korea. Within a year, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries completed the first U.S. Navy Regular Overhaul in a Japanese yard,[87] while Hanwha Ocean followed in South Korea under the Navy's Master Ship Repair Agreement (MSRA) program.[88] Each project demonstrated that allied yards could meet U.S. Navy standards for quality assurance, security, and cyber protection while sharply reducing transit times and costs.

Collectively, these developments form a distributed network across the Indo-Pacific; an essential adaptation in an era where repair capacity, not just platform count, will shape persistence and deterrence.

Northeast Asia Integration. Del Toro's visit to Yokosuka and Geoje affirmed that forward sustainment is now integral to deterrence. Hanwha's planned $5 billion expansion of the Philly Shipyard, linking Korean capital with American labor, demonstrates how allied investment and U.S. industrial revitalization are converging into a single ecosystem.[89]

South Asia Hubs. India strengthened this lattice through MSRAs signed in 2023–2024 with the U.S. Navy's Military Sealift Command, authorizing facilities such as Larsen & Toubro's Kattupalli and Mazagon Dock to service U.S. logistics vessels.[90] These accords mark a breakthrough in trusted industrial cooperation—reducing voyage times, expanding repair capacity, and positioning India as a credible maritime hub in the northern Indian Ocean.[91] They also build on India's foundational logistics and defense agreements with Washington, enhancing operational reach and resilience as U.S. shipyards face persistent capacity strain.

Oceanic Anchor. Australia is emerging as the southern pillar of the network. In 2025, Australian strategists proposed accelerating construction of the planned Henderson Shipyard in Western Australia as a joint U.S.–Australian facility capable of maintaining both U.S. and Royal Australian Navy submarines.[92] Such a site would ease Washington's chronic submarine-maintenance backlog, one-third of the attack fleet as of 2023, while helping Canberra meet AUKUS certification requirements for Virginia-class transfers. If realized, Henderson would become the U.S. Navy's fifth major shipyard and its only nuclear-certified facility west of Hawaii, providing forward repair capacity in the Indian Ocean. In parallel, Australian Submarine Corporation (ASC) technicians training at Pearl Harbor Shipyard under AUKUS extend this network

southward, linking allied industrial capacity with Indo-Pacific deterrence.[93]

Forward sustainment capacity has thus become as vital to deterrence as ammunition stockpiles or strategic airlift. Each day saved in overhaul restores operational presence, the true currency of maritime endurance.

These allied initiatives coincide with significant reforms across the U.S. acquisition enterprise. Executive Order 14265 and the Department's Acquisition Transformation Strategy together have established the *Warfighting Acquisition System*,[94] making speed-to-capability the governing metric for sustaining deterrence and operational advantage.[95] Rather than treating acquisition as a compliance exercise, the new framework empowers portfolio-level leadership to reallocate resources across interdependent programs, deliver "good-enough" increments on schedule, and prioritize usable capability over protracted development cycles.[96]

Pete Hegseth, Secretary of War, has framed the shift in clear terms: the United States must be prepared to assume greater acquisition risk to reduce operational risk. In practice, this approach links incentives to delivery timelines and mission outcomes, preserves dual sourcing and competition for critical components, and introduces mechanisms, such as the Economic Defense Unit and expanded coordination with the Office of Strategic Capital, to better align private capital with industrial shortfalls. The Department has signaled a preference for commercially proven solutions and iterative modernization over extended pursuit of exquisite systems, with executive accountability tied to performance.

Taken together, these reforms integrate industrial resilience abroad with agility at home. They strengthen demand signals, encourage allied and partner investment in production capacity, and institutionalize an acquisition model designed for speed, scale, and sustained deterrence in a contested Indo-Pacific.

At its core, America's strategic edge rests on three interlocking pillars: *deterrence*, which convinces rivals that aggression will fail; *lethality*, which imposes costs swiftly and at scale; and w*arrior ethos*, which binds strength to discipline, judgment, and restraint. Each without the other is brittle. Deterrence without lethality is a bluff. Lethality without warrior ethos risks miscalculation. Warrior ethos without capability is noble but ineffective. Yet material strength and industrial depth alone do not deter; they must be animated by credibility in the minds of adversaries.

The warrior ethos itself is neither uniquely American nor a relic of a more primitive age. As Edward Luttwak famously observed, military power persuades or dissuades only when recognized strength is coupled with a perceived willingness to use it; where that willingness is doubted, even formidable forces lose their coercive effect.[97] From Homeric Greece through imperial Japan to the modern United States, effective military power has always rested on a cultural readiness to accept risk, hardship, and loss in the service of collective purpose. Strategy and technology can amplify that foundation, but they cannot substitute for it. Where warrior norms erode, deterrence weakens, not because weapons disappear, but because adversaries perceive hesitation behind them.

War is not a static contest of plans, but a dynamic process of action and counteraction, shaped by friction, uncertainty, terrain,

and human judgment. The moment force is employed, intentions collide with resistance, conditions change, and advantages must be recalculated in real time. In such an environment, endurance, adaptability, and disciplined initiative matter as much as preparation. Enduring advantage, therefore, cannot rest on prewar designs alone; it depends on the capacity to absorb surprise, adjust faster than an adversary, and sustain credible action as circumstances evolve.

These are not abstractions but operational imperatives in an era of compressed decision cycles and blurred thresholds between peace and conflict. At the tactical level, advantage still depends on "the range of fire…the accuracy of fire…and the effect of fire."[98] At the operational level, as Christian Brose argues in *The Killing Chain*, competition in "moving, shooting, and communicating—and at a deeper level, understanding, deciding, and acting—will determine future military advantage."[99] As an artillery officer, I learned early that "shoot, move, and communicate" is not a slogan but a survival algorithm; an axiom as true in today's multi-domain operations as it was during the Cold War. Admiral Samuel J. Paparo Jr. reinforced this logic in 2025, warning that deterrence now hinges on the Joint Force's ability to "see, understand, decide, and act faster than any adversary."[100]

The constant remains: just as steam and industrial logistics once overcame the tyranny of distance, today's and tomorrow's edge will come from *kill webs*—distributed, reconfigurable battle networks that can pair any sensor to any shooter, reroute effects under attack, and assemble cross-domain options at combat speed.[101] These networks compress decision time and raise the cost of disruption—

but only if leaders prioritize interoperability, open architectures, common data standards, and genuine joint integration.[102]

China's modernization and Russia's disruption make speed and coherence indispensable. Power must be visible. Presence must be sustained. Decisions must outpace provocation. In this contested age, the fusion of deterrence, lethality, and warrior ethos is not merely an advantage; it is the hinge on which America's ability to shape the strategic environment, rather than be shaped by it, will turn.

The Indo-Pacific: Where America's Edge Will Be Decided

No region is more central to the future of American power than the Indo-Pacific. It contains over half of humanity and global output, spans the world's busiest sea lanes and chokepoints, and remains the arena where the risk of strategic miscalculation is greatest; the theater in which America's strategic edge will be either reaffirmed or lost.[103]

The Indo-Pacific is decisive for three core reasons. First, it is home to the only peer competitor capable of contesting the United States across every domain of power. China's rapid military modernization has produced the world's largest navy by hull count,[104] a dense array of long-range missile forces, expanding space and counterspace capabilities, and a sophisticated cyber apparatus. Though its defense budget is smaller in nominal terms, purchasing-power-parity adjustments suggest that Beijing's effective command of military resources now rivals, and by some metrics, approaches half of, the total defense-related expenditures of the United States.[105] These resources are not distributed globally but are concentrated in

asymmetric capabilities designed to blunt American power projection and disrupt joint operations within the first and second island chains.[106]

Second, the region is anchored by America's most capable allies and partners. Japan, Australia, and South Korea combine advanced industrial economies with significant defense contributions—from undersea warfare and integrated missile defense to logistics and munitions production.[107] Their alignment with Washington forms a formidable counterweight to coercion,[108] and the endurance of this coalition will determine whether the regional balance of power remains stable or fractures under pressure.[109]

Third, the Indo-Pacific is the proving ground for new domains of competition.[110] It is already the site of persistent state-sponsored cyber intrusions,[111] continuous orbital surveillance,[112] and the rapid integration of AI into command and control.[113] The race to connect sensors, shooters, and decision-makers faster than an adversary will be contested here first—making speed, resilience, and integration as decisive as mass.

The Indo-Pacific is no longer a backdrop to global competition; it is the main stage. The contest between coercion and collective deterrence will unfold across its sea lanes, airspace, littorals, and digital terrain. America's edge, refined over centuries, must now be reasserted here: tested against China's layered A2/AD network, validated through distributed and resilient logistics, and sustained by a warrior ethos equal to the ethical and operational demands of multi-domain warfare.

America at 250: A Strategic Inflection Point

As the United States marks its 250th year, it again faces a familiar test in unfamiliar form. Moments of renewal in American history have often followed periods of doubt, but only when met with political will, public trust, and a clear sense of strategic purpose.

That need is urgent once more. In 1946, George F. Kennan warned that "much depends on the health and vigor of our own society,"[114] for adversaries thrive on internal weakness. His caution endures. In today's era of competitive multipolarity, rivals exploit every fissure—political polarization, economic inequality, and industrial fragility—to erode confidence and weaken resolve from within. America's strategic edge now rests as much on democratic credibility and societal resilience—the human foundations of the warrior ethos—as it does on ships, missiles, or machines.

Yet the foundation remains formidable. The United States commands global reach, unrivaled alliances, and an unmatched capacity for reinvention. But advantage is never self-sustaining; it must be continuously renewed. Renewal demands sustained investment in deterrence and lethality, the cultivation of warrior ethos equal to the moral and operational challenges of the age, and disciplined choices that align ends with means, from fiscal responsibility to deeper allied burden-sharing.

This volume answers that call. It examines how America built its edge, how the edge is now being tested, and what must be done to secure it for the century ahead. The stakes are high, but so, too, is the promise: to transform uncertainty into renewal, and renewal into

enduring strength; an achievement worthy of a republic at 250 years, still striving to lead not by dominance, but by example.

Endnotes

1 The author is solely responsible for the views expressed in this publication, which do not necessarily represent the official policy or position of the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, the U.S. Department of War, or the U.S. government.

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