

# ***The Thrust of the Nixon Doctrine***

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*The views expressed in this article are the author's and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Defense or its agencies. —Editor.*

**T**HE President outlined the first elements of the Nixon doctrine at Guam in 1969, expanded them in theory and action in 1970, and, in 1971, further updated and clarified the long-range guidelines for US foreign policy. These guidelines, along with his previous statements, frame a doctrine that skillfully adjusts US policy to historical change. However, a challenge remains in carrying it out.

The Nixon doctrine recognizes the increased capabilities of Free World nations, the diversity within the Communist camp, and the national interests and domestic mood of Americans. It seeks peace. Yet it recognizes that, realistically, peace and stability are best achieved not by appeasement, but by keeping international forces in equilibrium and moderation. It blends these factors into a flexible foreign policy of neither overcommitment nor isolation.

The doctrine is based on partnership and a gradual assumption of greater responsibility by US allies and regional and international organizations. One may view it as the relinquishing of US power by degrees. It probably more accurately fosters the redistribution of responsibility among the Free World nations in a way that encourages their initiatives and development. It accepts the idea of an international system of more multipolarity and diversity. It is a policy stressing diplomacy and negotiations between Free World countries and their Communist competitors yet designed to prevent a destabilizing collapse of the balance of power in Europe and Asia.

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### Realistic Deterrence

The administration plans to back up the doctrine of partnership and negotiations with strength-not power as an end in itself, but power adequate for the purpose of moving toward peace. This strength will be provided by a defense policy of “realistic deterrence” of all levels of conflict, relying on both US and allied strategic and general purpose forces.

Devising supporting programs to carry out the Nixon doctrine calls for closely integrated planning among the US Government agencies and departments that deal with foreign affairs and national security. Under the policy guidance of the President and the National Security Council, the Department of State, the Defense Department, the Departments of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, and the Agency for International Development or the proposed International Development Corporation and International Development Institute must carry out a well-balanced program, its component elements being mutually supporting. This latter point “would seem to be a key one.



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### Alternatives

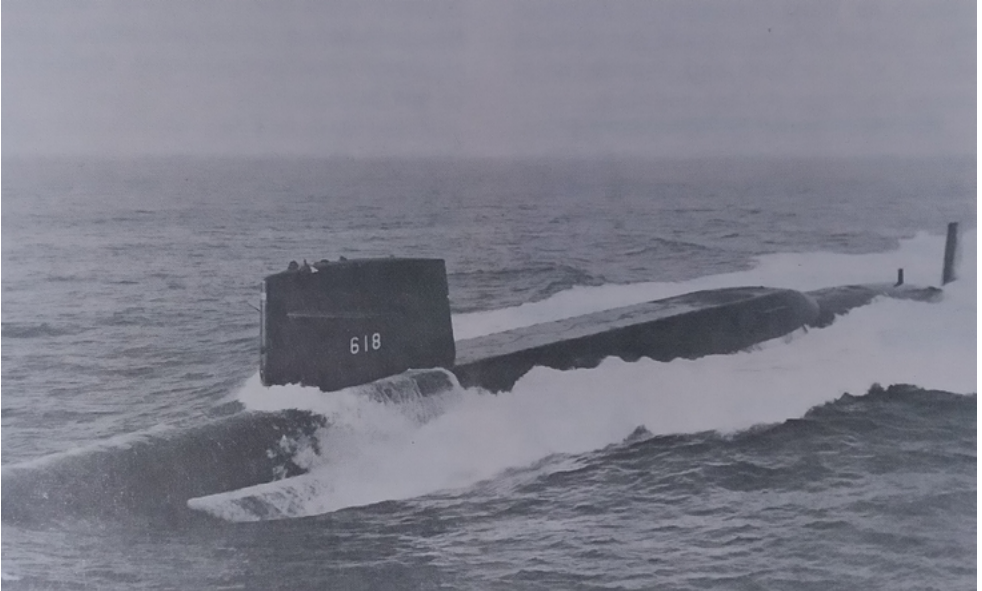
However, there has been a trend, perhaps influenced by the weariness of the American public with war and foreign commitments, to see the key point of the doctrine as US withdrawal from overseas involvement. Granted, the US withdrawal from Vietnam is a salient feature of the doctrine, but is that its general thrust?

There are also persons outside the Government who would prefer to see, instead of a gradual redistribution of power and a balanced military program, an immediate pullout of all US troops now assisting the defense of our allies in Western Europe and east Asia. Others say we could find a cheap solution by heavy reliance on strategic nuclear weapons. Others assert our “strategy for tomorrow” should be one of ships. Admittedly, in view of the mood of the American people, any strategy which might keep down the risk of spilling American blood overseas has attractive features.

We might then ask whether the United States should retain its present program of balanced elements or shift more toward one of these alluring alternatives. Why has the administration taken the harder course? To answer these questions, let us take a closer look at the Nixon doctrine and “realistic deterrence.”

The Nixon doctrine plans to contribute to a stable, peaceful world first by recognizing the legitimate national interests of all countries and competing forces and trends. Through negotiations, it would attempt to reduce tensions and problems. In working toward this objective, the United States will operate as much as possible with its allies as a team in the economic, diplomatic, and security areas, and yet diverse interests would be respected.

Foreign policy actions will be more multilateral. The United States will pass on

*US Navy*

**Strong strategic nuclear retaliatory forces are integral to the total force concept.**

to other states some of the responsibilities that it had to assume during the more desperate years of the cold war. The key to the doctrine is not US withdrawal from foreign affairs, but, rather, the keeping of commitments. The doctrine outlines a long-range approach for sustained US participation in international affairs.

The Nixon doctrine stresses the increased importance of multilateral political and economic actions. However, it recognizes that military power is not obsolete, and defense measures will not be ignored.

The partnership of the United States and its allies will be supported by realistic deterrence based on a “total force” concept. The “total force” concept means combining US and allied military and related resources in a way to capitalize on available assets. These Free World resources would include Active and Reserve forces and an appropriate security assistance program.

Under this policy, the United States will keep enough retaliatory strategic nuclear forces to deter a nuclear attack by an aggressor. If a nuclear power threatened nuclear blackmail or a conventional attack backed by nuclear weapons on a US ally or a country whose survival was considered vital to the US national interest—such as West Germany or Japan—the United States would provide a shield of nuclear and conventional power to support that country.

The US strategic nuclear deterrence will consist of the “triad” of land-based missiles, manned bombers, and submarine-launched ballistic missiles. Added to these will be civil defense measures, a limited antiballistic missile defense, and tactical nuclear weapons.

### **General Purpose Forces**

Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird has explained that the United States will maintain in peacetime general purpose forces

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with our allies for meeting simultaneously a major Communist attack in either Europe or Asia, assisting allies against non-Chinese threats in Asia, and contending with a contingency elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> President Richard M. Nixon has stated, viewing the strategic impact of approximate nuclear parity, that general purpose forces “now play a greater role in deterring attacks than at any time since the nuclear era began.”<sup>2</sup>

Concerning the precepts upon which general purpose forces will be built, the President has stated that: “Our capabilities must rest on our Allies’ strength, strong US forces overseas, and the availability of credible reinforcement.” He brings out that weakness in conventional forces could invite conventional attack. Also, in case of conventional attack, the United States should have more than one option to use. President Nixon stated further: “We must not be in the position of being able to employ only strategic weapons to meet challenges to our interests.”

Regarding a Free World country’s internal defense, however, the President’s message is clear. “Future guerrilla and subversive threats should be dealt with primarily by the indigenous forces of our allies.” Such allies may receive economic and military assistance from the United States, but they must show that they are doing everything in their power to combat both the causes and effects of the insurgency.

On the other hand, the United States would not sit by passively while internal minorities,

aided by foreign powers and using the guise of wars of “national liberation,” take over Free World countries by force. The United States will assist Free World governments who are working for the welfare and defense of their people, but the United States will critically appraise the situation and the potential effectiveness of US aid.

### Flexibility

The strategy does not dictate that the contributions of our allies will always be ground forces. Many of our allies are highly industrialized, maritime nations. For example, our allies together have sizable naval strength and about five times the merchant marine tonnage of the Soviet Union. The buildup of Japanese air and naval strength to defend against the Soviet Pacific Fleet, for example, is a logical contribution from that skilled, technical country. Similarly keyed to our allies’ capabilities will be our security assistance program, part military sales and part grant aid.

The doctrine keeps enough flexibility of action to prevent its easy circumvention by a potential enemy. It obviously applies to various areas differently. It speaks of acting when US “interests” or the survival of a state “vital” to the US security are threatened, but leaves these definitions vague. It raises the threshold for the commitment of US ground troops in subtheater wars or insurgencies, but does not rule out that course of action. It speaks of having the options to meet aggression with measured force, but not necessarily limited to the level chosen by our enemy. Reports from Moscow indicate that the doctrine’s flexibility has left our competitors guessing.

### Planners Challenged

Implementing the Nixon doctrine has challenged the planners of US Government

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<sup>1</sup> *Statement of Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird Before the House Armed Services Committee on the Fiscal Year 1972-1976 Program and the 1972 Defense Budget*, 9 March 1971, “Toward a National Security Strategy of Realistic Deterrence,” Superintendent of Documents, US Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C., 1971.

<sup>2</sup> President Richard M. Nixon’s statements are from his *U.S. Foreign Policy for the 1970’s: Building for Peace*, 25 February 1971.

agencies and departments, for, clearly, political, economic, and military programs must be well coordinated.

The doctrine stresses the role of the State Department in using diplomacy to negotiate solutions for complex issues and to encourage a more productive international dialogue. The Department of State has the hard job of bringing the interests of the Free World allies into coordinated policies and representing our views in regional and international organizations. Also, it faces the problem of devising means to better spread the advantages of technology throughout the world.

The United States must increase foreign aid in order to assist our allies in shouldering their responsibilities with less direct US involvement abroad. The State Department will still have the main responsibility for coordinating economic, security, and humanitarian aid. Depending on Congress' action on the President's aid reform measures, we may have a new International Development Corporation and International Development Institute to replace the Agency for International Development in administering our international economic actions.

In carrying out the Department of Defense strategy of preventing wars by backing political and economic measures with "realistic deterrence," each military department has an indispensable role.

### **Service Roles**

The Navy Department's role will be vital. It will add to deterrence by providing submarine-launched ballistic missiles. It has the further missions of maintaining the capability to destroy an enemy's naval forces, raid an enemy's coast, and keep our wartime sealanes open. In the naval area, the Secretary of Defense's budget report

stresses the need for increased cooperation with allied naval forces and for additional sealift. The Marine Corps will emphasize a naval role and the readiness of small combat units afloat.

The Air Force's contribution should be a major one in the future. It will continue to provide intercontinental ballistic missiles and manned bombers for the nuclear deterrent. It must maintain its ability to obtain air superiority, to interdict, to conduct long-range reconnaissance, and to support US and allied ground troops with tactical air support. Stressing more use of "bare-base kits," it can provide the mobility for combat-ready Air Force and Army teams to move rapidly wherever required.

The Army will add realism to deterrence, particularly against takeover of land areas by force. It will provide, in Western Europe, the mainstay of US deterrence of Communist invasion and be a visible reassurance to our allies during this era of critical negotiations. In addition to adding deterrence worldwide, it will bear the main burden of advising and training allied military forces. It may have the job of supporting them with helicopter mobility, helicopter and artillery firepower, and logistic support. Further, the Army may contribute to international peace-keeping forces if requested by international organizations.

Thus, the Nixon doctrine and the strategy of realistic deterrence, as now conceived, call for strong political and economic programs backed by balanced armed forces. How does this plan differ from the concepts of withdrawal to "Fortress America" or of relying on nuclear weapons or on a maritime strategy? Why not shift to one of these strategies which seem to require less US effort?

A precipitous unilateral withdrawal of US forces from the Eurasian landmass

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could seriously upset the world balance of power. Studies conducted by Government planners in 1970 on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces and strategy showed, in particular, how important Western Europe is for US security. Unilateral withdrawals there could lead to a lack of confidence of European NATO in US resolve and could torpedo ongoing negotiations such as those on mutual and balanced force reductions.

Total reliance on nuclear weapons or a “tripwire” strategy would fail to insure deterrence at all levels as outlined by the President and the Secretary of Defense. The possible results of beginning nuclear warfare make their use credible only in desperate situations. The utility of strategic forces to deter lower levels of aggression and to discourage destabilizing political pressure can be expected to decrease in the future. We cannot return to the outmoded strategy of massive retaliation,

Relying on a maritime strategy would have serious defects. Surface naval

power has eroded in favor of aircraft and submarines. As more sophisticated aircraft, aerospace detection devices, submarines, missiles, and other lethal weapons develop, the vulnerability of surface ships will further increase. That this has not yet been fully realized by the American public attests to the enthusiasm of ship proponents. (The British realized it several years ago.)

While Soviet cruisers and destroyers, lacking air cover, are little military threat outside their close-in waters, they do halve the ability, in cold war-type situations, of interposing themselves and blocking the operations of Western warships or amphibious landings. Thus, surface navies have partially neutralized each other’s ability to exert political pressure on the seas’ littorals. The United States would be unwise to return to a 19th-century-type strategy of surface ships at a time when they are more vulnerable and less effective.

Nor is reliance on a combination of naval and airpower, while it may appear



**Highly industrialized allies like Japan might contribute airpower to a strategy of realistic deterrence.**

like an antiseptic solution, a workable long-term strategy. The demonstrated ability and willingness to use air and naval forces to support a partner, while useful, has yet to prove decisive and ranks lower on the scale of effectiveness than a demonstrated ability and willingness to use ground forces supported by naval and airpower.

Most scholars of international relations believe that the likelihood of forms of conflict in the coming decades appear to be, in order:

- Low-intensity conflict, particularly in developing areas.
- Nonnuclear, subtheater conflict.
- Nonnuclear theater warfare (involving the existence of a major power).
- Tactical nuclear theater warfare.
- Strategic nuclear exchange.

It is apparent that, in the most likely forms of conflict, ground forces will still be the decisive element.

If, as some theorists believe, the psychological use of military power will be more important in the future than its actual use, it further behooves us to maintain balanced military forces. Unbalanced defense forces which could not actually halt aggression against land areas will not fool a

potential aggressor for long. Deterrence must be realistic.

In the psychological arena, it would probably also be wise to expose propaganda voyages by small Soviet flotillas to Hawaiian, Alaskan, or Indian Ocean waters for what they are, rather than blowing them up as real military threats.

Thus, the alternate strategies, despite their surface attractiveness, have serious weaknesses. Neither the "Fortress America," the nuclear, the maritime, nor the air-naval power strategies can properly support US foreign policy and national security goals.

The acid test for strategy and its implementing program is whether it can provide adequate support for national policy and the goals that policy pursues. The United States has pledged to keep its commitments. Accomplishing this while carrying out the delicate process of redistributing responsibility and initiative among the Free World nations, without imperiling world stability, will not be easy. The program that supports it must be well conceived and skillfully executed. The political process must be protected by a credible deterrence against all levels of threat. This is the thrust of the Nixon doctrine and its balanced supporting program.