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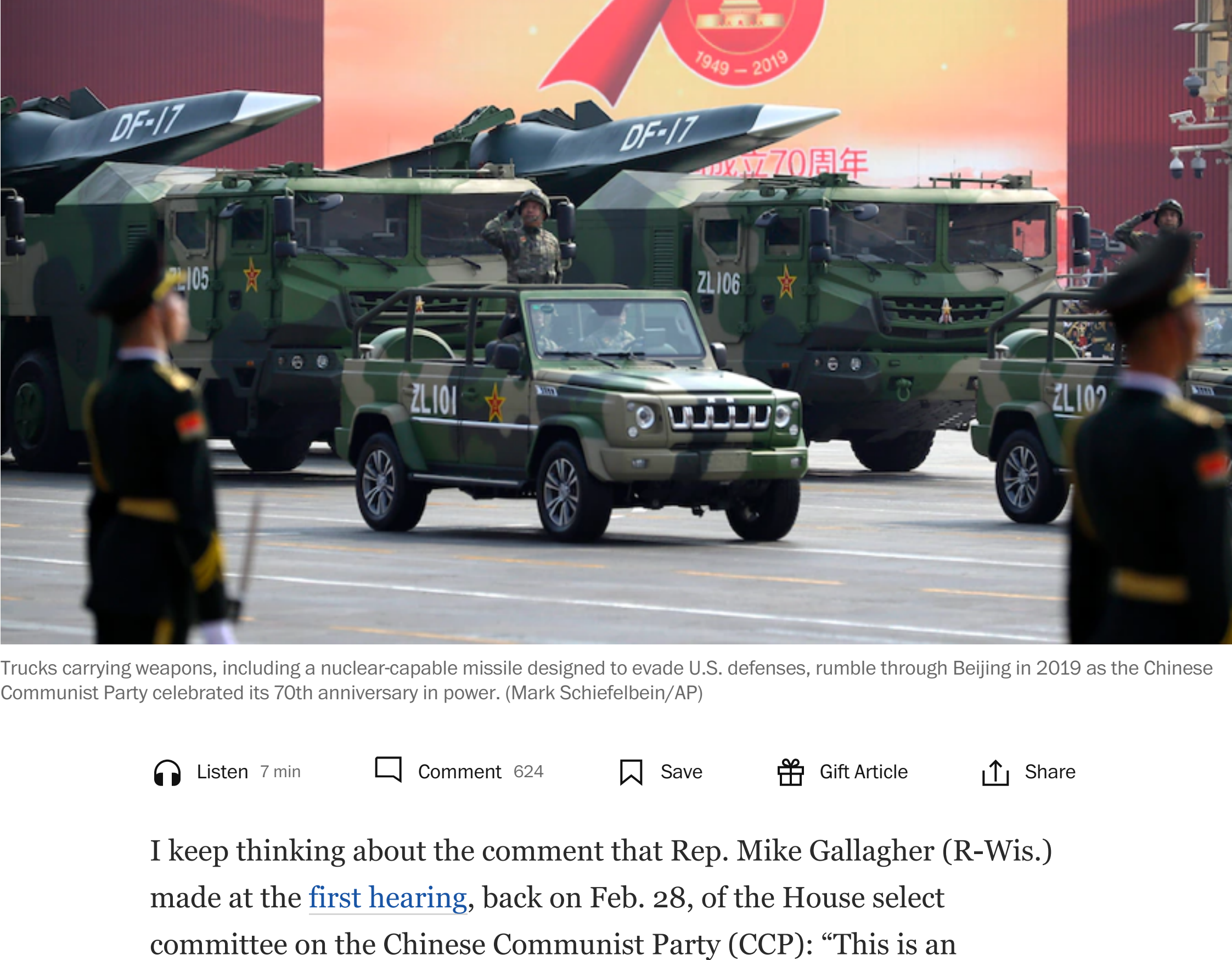
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Opinion | In the U.S.-China competition, the real ‘existential’ danger is nuclear war

By Max Boot
Columnist | + Follow

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Trucks carrying weapons, including a nuclear-capable missile designed to evade U.S. defenses, rumble through Beijing in 2019 as the Chinese Communist Party celebrated its 70th anniversary in power. (Mark Schiefelbein/AP)

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I keep thinking about the comment that Rep. Mike Gallagher (R-Wis.) made at the [first hearing](#), back on Feb. 28, of the House select committee on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP): “This is an existential struggle over what life will look like in the 21st century, and the most fundamental freedoms are at stake.” The committee chairman was right, but not in the way that he meant.

A leading China hawk, Gallagher claimed: “The CCP is laser-focused on its vision for the future — a world crowded with techno-totalitarian surveillance states where human rights are subordinate to the whims of the party.” While it’s true that the Chinese Communist Party has created a system of “techno-totalitarian surveillance” in China and is happy to sell its surveillance technology to [other countries](#), there is scant evidence that it is conspiring to export its system of oppression globally. Gallagher’s vision is merely an update of the old Cold War paranoia about a supposed Soviet plot to take over the world, which missed the fact that Soviet leaders were driven primarily by defensive concerns about their own security.

But Gallagher is right that the United States and China are locked in an existential struggle, because this new cold war, like the original Cold War with the Soviet Union, has the potential to turn into a nuclear conflict. This is a danger that China hawks — and the U.S. public in general — do not pay sufficient attention to. President Biden, for example, repeatedly says that the United States will [defend Taiwan](#) if it’s attacked, without any mention of the potential consequences of a conflict with China.

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“It seems odd that war with China over Taiwan seems a comfortable assumption for so many when the U.S. and NATO remain cautious about Russia’s war in Ukraine precisely because of the perceived risk of nuclear escalation,” [John K. Culver](#), a CIA veteran and former national intelligence officer for East Asia, told me.

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Even many worst-case scenarios about China are too sanguine about the outcome of a conflict. In March, for example, House Republicans took part in a U.S.-China war game organized by retired Rear Adm. [Mark Montgomery](#), a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. After the exercise was first reported by my Post colleague [Olivier Knox](#), I reached out to Montgomery to ask how it unfolded and whether it included a nuclear exchange.

He said, “The war game ended up with China having a lodgment on Taiwan, but not having defeated the Taiwan Army.” The United States suffered “significant casualties” and Taiwan “awful casualties.” Montgomery explained that the scenario “did not escalate to nuclear, although that is certainly a possibility in this sort of contingency.”

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The lack of a nuclear exchange is quite common in U.S.-China war games, at least those conducted at the unclassified level. (A senior defense official told me this is no longer the case with top-secret Pentagon war games.) A recent [war game](#) organized by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), like the congressional war game, had the United States and its allies defeating a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. Victory came at “high cost” — “The United States and its allies lost dozens of ships, hundreds of aircraft, and tens of thousands of service members” — but not at the *highest* cost: i.e., the destruction of U.S. cities. CSIS senior adviser Mark F. Cancian told me that, although he would pursue “a follow-on project that looks at nuclear operations,” he wanted to focus specifically on conventional operations.

That’s a perfectly legitimate choice, but it inadvertently risks reinforcing assumptions that a U.S.-China conflict could avoid nuclear escalation. Even a New York Times [op-ed](#) in February written by an Australian scholar, headlined “A War With China Would Be Unlike Anything Americans Faced Before,” focused on cyberwarfare and economic warfare — not nuclear warfare.

And yet China is in the midst of a rapid nuclear buildup. The latest Pentagon report on [Chinese military power](#) projects that its nuclear stockpile will grow from 400 warheads today to 1,500 warheads by 2035. The report also warns that, while China nominally adheres to a “no first use” policy on nuclear weapons, “Beijing probably would ... consider nuclear use to restore deterrence if a conventional military defeat gravely threatened PRC survival.” Given that a failed invasion of Taiwan could threaten the CCP’s power, it’s reasonable to worry that China could up the ante by going nuclear.

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The risk of nuclear escalation is all the greater because, as a senior U.S. admiral explained to me, it would be difficult for the United States to win a war over Taiwan by attacking only Chinese ships at sea and Chinese aircraft in the skies. The United States could find itself compelled, as a matter of military necessity, to attack bases in China. China, in turn, could strike U.S. bases in Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Guam, even Hawaii and the West Coast.

Culver, the former intelligence officer, told me, “Even if Beijing announced that its retaliatory strikes against Hawaii or the West Coast of the U.S. were conventionally armed, it would risk immediate U.S. escalation. Can a U.S. president refuse to launch in the 30 minutes between missile launch from China and impact in the U.S.?”

When two nuclear-armed powers attack each other’s territory, it would be difficult to keep the conflict contained at a conventional level. Both sides, admittedly, would have an incentive to avoid “mutual assured destruction,” but countries often act rashly in the heat of battle, particularly after they have suffered significant casualties and feel the need to ensure that their troops did not die in vain.

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For a sense of how destructive a war with China could be, read “[2034: A Novel of the Next World War](#)” by retired Adm. James Stavridis, a former supreme allied commander in Europe, and Marine combat veteran Elliot Ackerman. It ends — spoiler alert — with nuclear devastation in both countries.

Stavridis told me: “If the U.S. and China manage to sleepwalk into a conventional war, the chances of it escalating into a nuclear exchange are significant. Two great powers who face each other in combat are unlikely to avoid using tactical nuclear weapons, at least at sea. Once that threshold is crossed, it is but a short step to a much broader nuclear conflict. Think 1914 with nuclear weapons at the ready.”

1914 with nuclear weapons? Now that’s an existential danger.

This is not an argument for kowtowing to Beijing or abandoning Taiwan. It is, however, a potent warning about the dangers of blundering into war with China. The United States should continue to support Taiwan and to deter China, but should also keep lines of communication open and avoid needless provocations such as recognizing Taiwan’s independence — as has been rashly [suggested](#) in the past year by former secretary of state Mike Pompeo and [19 House members](#). That’s a fast-track to World War III. Maintaining the fiction that Taiwan is a renegade province of China is a small price to pay for avoiding nuclear annihilation.

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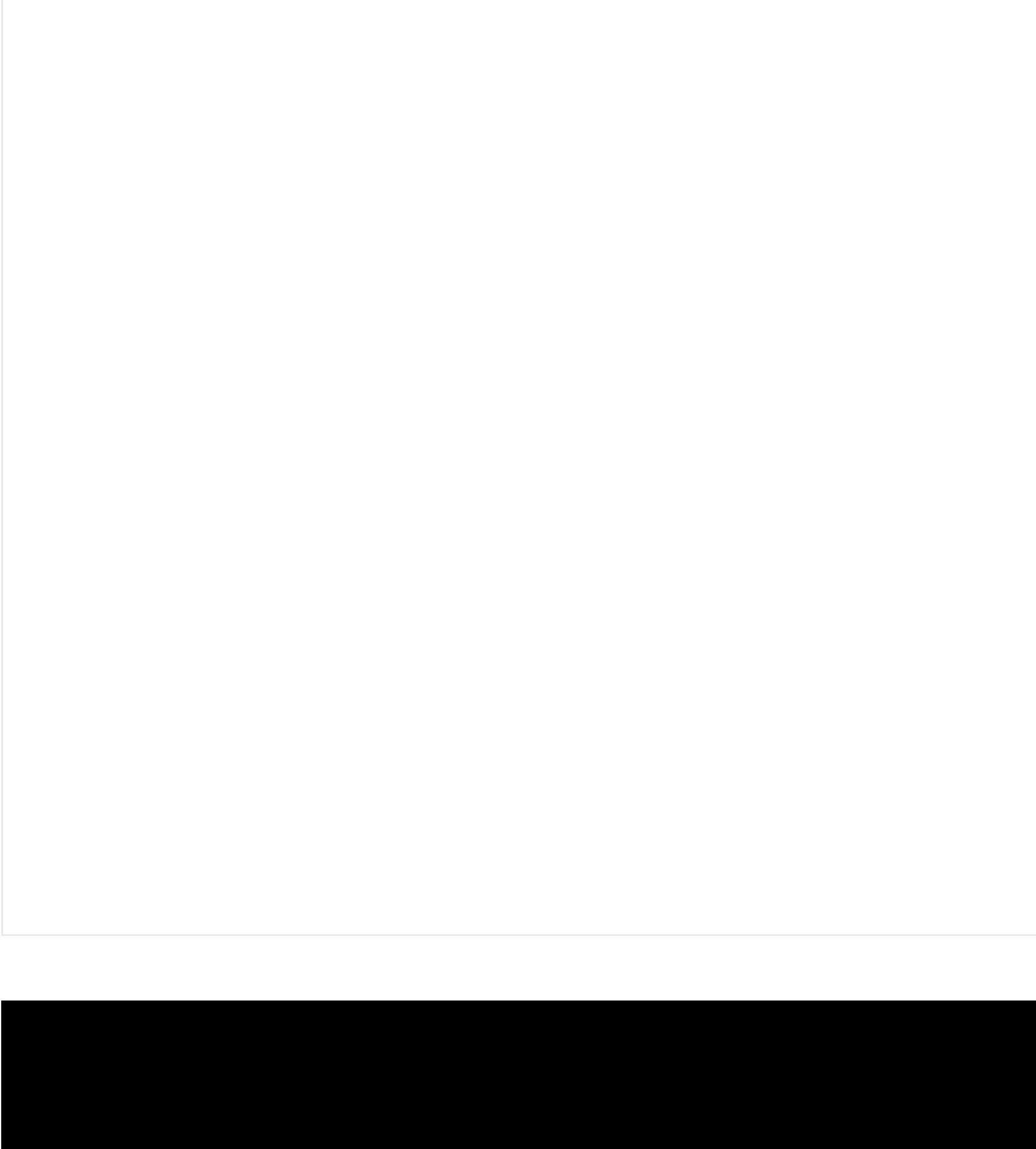
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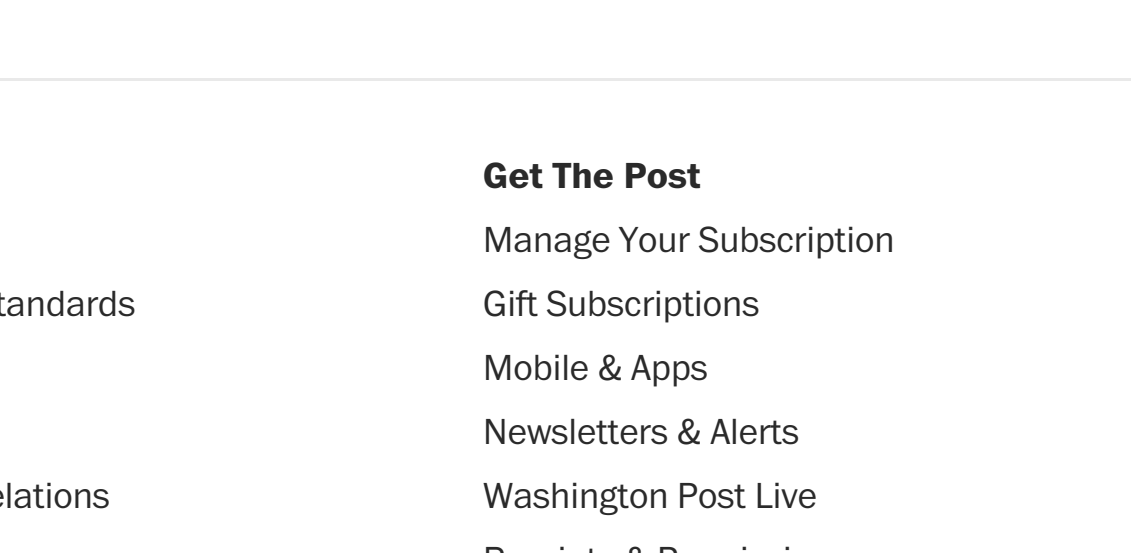
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