

# **World War III?**

## **Preparing for Great Power Conflict**



**UNITED STATES ARMY  
WAR COLLEGE**

**STRENGTH & WISDOM**

**John Nagl**



# Global Environment



- Russo-Ukraine War
- Hamas, Hezbollah vs. Israel
- US-PRC tensions over Philippines, Taiwan
- North Korea
- Iranian proxy forces across the Middle East (Houthis)

# The 2023 and 2024 Ukraine IRP Teams

- I. The U.S. Army's Inflection Point**— LTC Katie Crombe and Dr. John Nagl
- II. Ukrainian History and Perspective**— COL Volodymyr Grabchak and Myra Naqvi
- III. NATO and Deterrence**— COL Dale Caswell
- IV. US-Ukrainian Security Cooperation**—COL Povilas Strazdas
- V. Multi-Domain Operations**— LTC Steve Chadwick
- VI. Intelligence**— LTC Clay Huffman
- VII. Fires**— LTC Jay Bradley
- VIII. Maneuver**— LTC Jason Lojka
- IX. Mission Command**— COL Jamon K. Junius
- X. Senior Leader Resilience and Replacement**— LTC Brian Dukes
- XI. Personnel and Strategic Depth**— LTC Stephen Kenneth Trynosky
- XII. Sustainment**— LTC Darrick Wesson
- XIII. Protection**— LTC Matt Holbrook
- XIV. Medical**—COL Dennis Sarmiento, MD
- XV. Maritime**— Mr. Thomas Kunish and Prof Al Lord
- XVI. Air** — Mr Sean Wiswesser



**Diplomacy and the Road to War**—Michael Hackett, DOS

**Operational Art in the Russo-Ukraine War of 2023**— LTC Michael Haith

**Intelligence**—COL Benjamin Iverson, LTC Michael Cookey

**Information**—LTC Alex Tignor

**Fires**—COL Jay Johnson, LTC Eli Ward, COL Michael Tumlin

**Mission Command**—COL Joe Junguzza

**Resilience:** COL Kyle Yates

**Maneuver**—COL Chris Brawley, COL John Gabriel, LTC Aaron Morrison

**War Termination**—COL Brian Scicluna

**Mercenaries**—LTC Rasmus Solaas (Norway)

**Protection**—COL Sean Shields, LTC Matt Schmunk

**Ukraine's Postwar Future**—COL Andranik Hasparian (Ukraine), Marko Nikituk

**Airpower**—Lt Col Marcus (Boss) Antonini, LTC Hardi (Stone) Lammergas (Estonia)

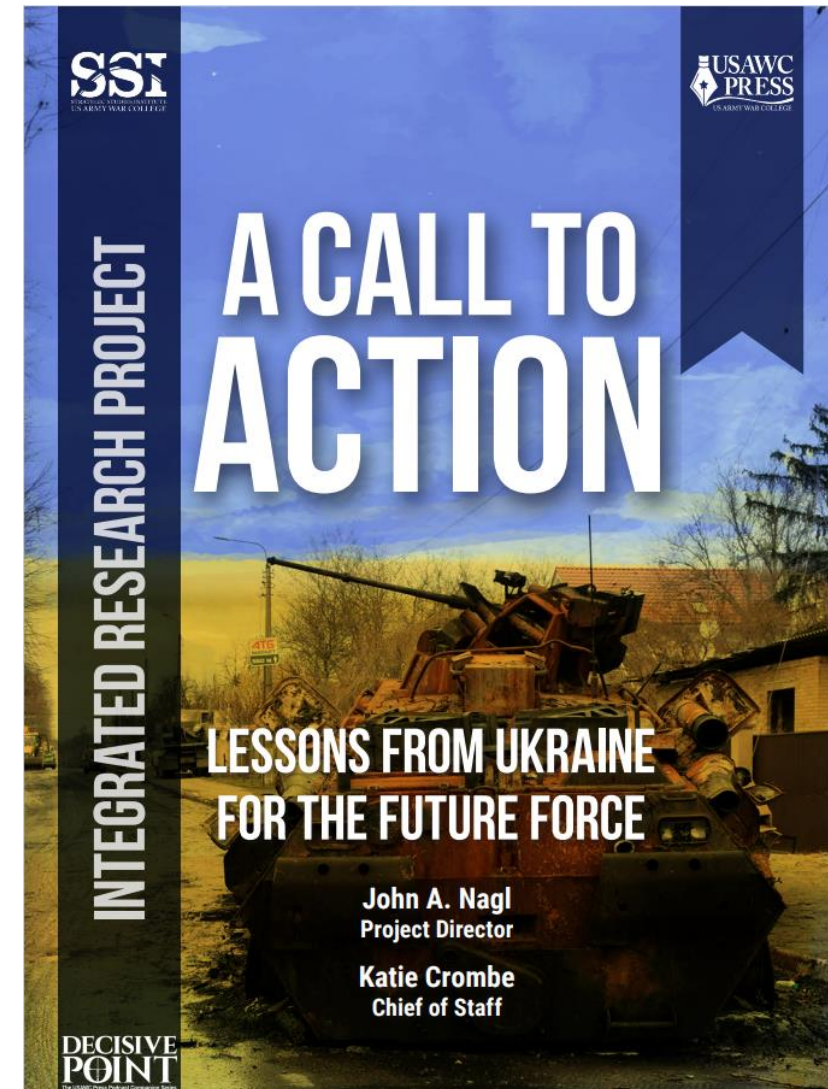
**Maritime**—LtCol Saúl Manzanet

**Integrated Lessons Learned**—Dr. John Nagl



# Lessons Learned from Year One – A Call to Action

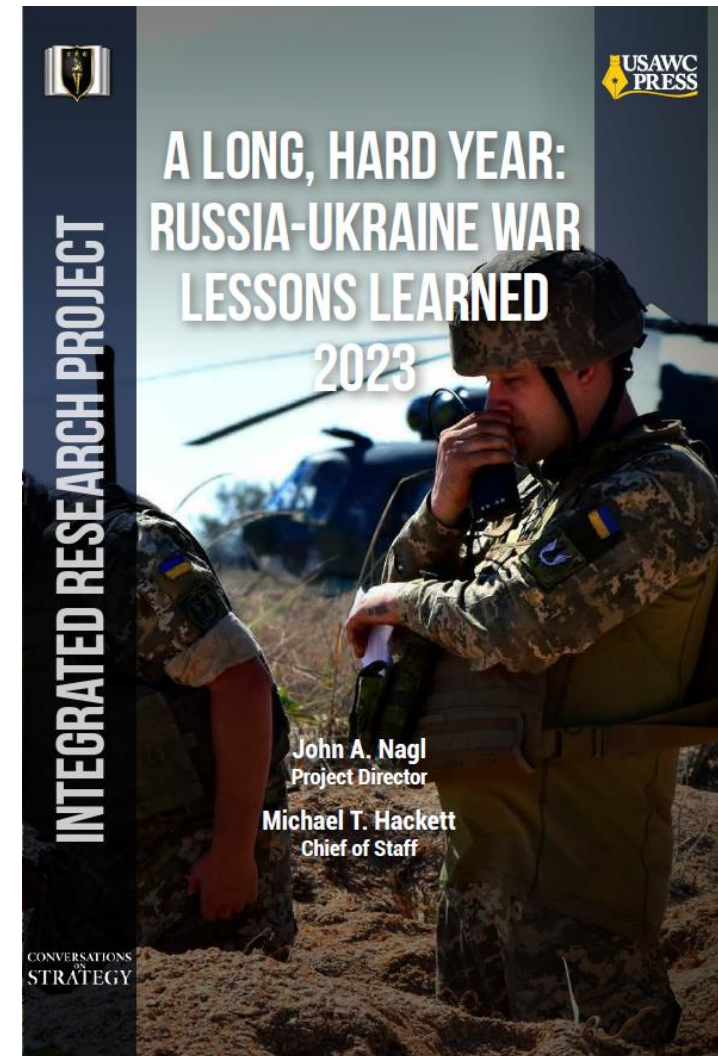
- The U.S. Army is at an inflection point
- Rapid fundamental changes to the character of war
- Organizational Culture must change
- Unprecedented strategic depth challenges in personnel and munitions
- LSCO is projected to produce casualties not seen since WWII
- C2 and sustainment nodes will be targeted



Crombe & Nagl: [\*A Call to Action: Lessons from Ukraine for the Future Force\*](#)

# Lessons Learned from Year Two – *A Long Hard Year*

- Importance of distributed operations and mission command
- Trench warfare and challenges to maneuver and protection
- Fires again as the “King of Battle,” EW capabilities crucial
- Air denial predominates in the Russia-Ukraine war—but Air Superiority is still essential for the Joint Force
- U.S. and NATO unambiguous and consistent support is crucial to Ukraine
- Leadership key to national resilience



Hackett & Nagl: [A Long Hard Year: Russia-Ukraine Lessons Learned 2023](#)

## Lessons Learned from Year Three - *Innovation and Adaptation*

- The impact and promise of emerging, multi-use technology on warfighting functions and domains.
- Ukrainian forces improved their distributed command and initiative through artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled tools
- Ukraine applied tenets and imperatives of MDO to achieve operational surprise with its Kursk offensive



- Barring significant changes during the war or the parties' objectives, fighting is likely to continue, not for weeks or months, but for years.

# World War III?

“We can see now that the great unraveling that was World War II perhaps began with Japan’s 1931 invasion of Manchuria. Without the benefit of retrospection, we cannot be certain that World War III has not begun.”

-George Will, *Washington Post*, April 24, 2024

“World War Three. It would be an unholy alliance between Russia, China, Iran, [and] North Korea, threatening both Europe and the Pacific.”

-House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Mike McCaul (R-TX)  
cited in *Washington Post*, May 3, 2024

# World War III?

“To me, a serious possibility of worldwide warfare may be only in the 20–30 percent range. But that assessment is not reassuring..”

-Philip Zelikow, “Confronting Another Axis? History, Humility, and Wishful Thinking”, *TNSR*, May 2024

“Too many Western observers have been quick to dismiss the implications of coordination among China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia ...their shared aim of weakening the United States and its leadership role provides a strong adhesive.”

-Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Richard Fontaine, “The Axis of Upheaval: How America’s Adversaries Are Uniting to Overturn the Global Order”  
*Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2024

# World War III?

“The threats the United States faces are the most serious and most challenging the nation has encountered since 1945 and include the potential for near-term major war. ... The nation ... is not prepared today.”

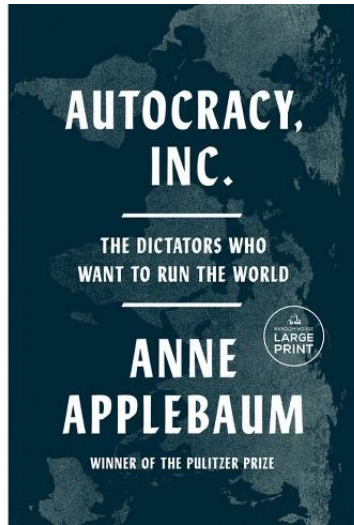
*-Commission on the National Defense Strategy, July 2024*

“After a 30-year holiday from history, we face an aggressive China and Russia (abetted by North Korea and Iran) and the very real prospect of war between nuclear-armed great powers.”

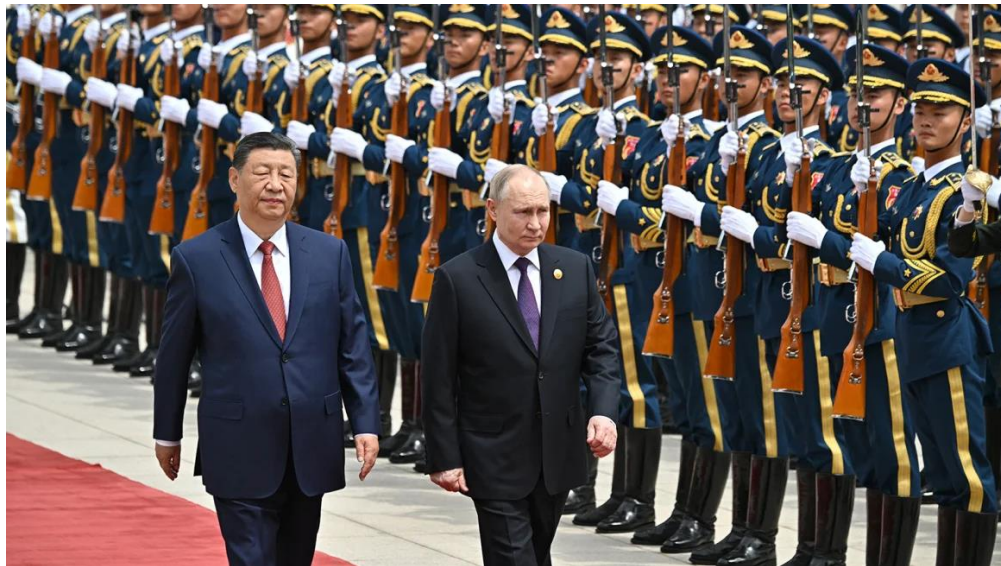
*-Former SECDEF Robert Gates, Washington Post, September 24, 2024*

# Autocracy, Inc. (Anne Applebaum)

June 19, 2024



May 16, 2024



## Russia and North Korea sign partnership deal that appears to be the strongest since the Cold War



## Moscow-Beijing partnership has 'no limits'

Feb 4 (Reuters) - China's President Xi Jinping and Russia's Vladimir Putin met in Beijing on Friday and announced a strategic partnership that they said was aimed at countering the influence of the United States and that would have "no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation". [read more](#)

Here are some key points from their joint statement.

- Russia voiced support for China's stance that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China, and opposition to any form of independence for the island.

## Wall Street Journal June 19 2024

WASHINGTON—Russia’s military cooperation with Iran, North Korea and China has expanded into the sharing of sensitive technologies that could threaten the U.S. and its allies long after the Ukraine war ends, according to U.S. defense and intelligence officials.

The speed and depth of the expanding security ties involving the U.S. adversaries has at times surprised American intelligence analysts. Russia and the other nations have set aside historic frictions to collectively counter what they regard as a U.S.-dominated global system, they said.

# How Putin Rebuilt Russia’s War Machine With Help From U.S. Adversaries

Iran, North Korea and China are supplying the people and know-how to tool up Russia’s factories and churn out arms for the war in Ukraine

Admiral Vladimir Putin with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in Pyongyang, North Korea, this week. GAVRIIL GRIGOROV/SPUTNIK/KREMLIN POOL

By [Warren P. Strobel](#) [Follow](#) and [Michael R. Gordon](#) [Follow](#)

Updated June 19, 2024 3:06 pm ET

“Russia’s war in Ukraine is...propped up by China, North Korea, and Iran,” NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said Tuesday in a joint news conference with Secretary of State Antony Blinken. “They want to see the U.S. fail. They want to see NATO fail. If they succeed in Ukraine, it will make us more vulnerable and the world more dangerous.”

# The New York Times

## *U.K. Faces Most Serious Military Threat Since Cold War, Starmer Says*

Prime Minister Keir Starmer cited “growing Russian aggression” as he outlined ambitious rearmament plans, including building up to 12 attack submarines.

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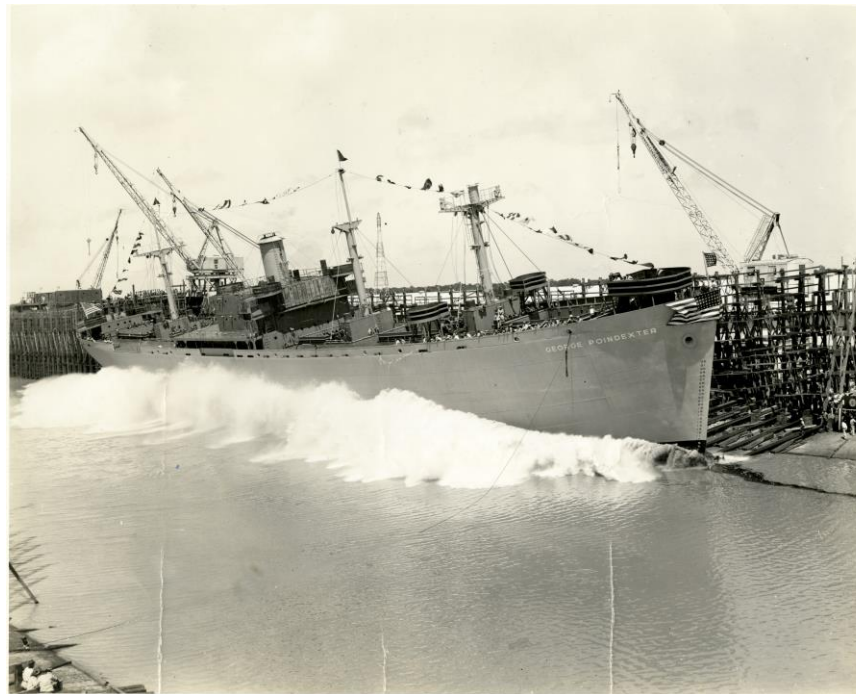
“The threat we now face is more serious, more immediate and more unpredictable than at any time since the Cold War,” Mr. Starmer said on Monday (June 1 2025) at a shipyard in Glasgow. He pointed to “war in Europe, new nuclear risks, daily cyberattacks,” and “growing Russian aggression,” in British waters and skies.

# Arsenal of Democracy



“During the past year, American production capacity for war planes, including engines, has risen from approximately 6,000 planes a year to more than double that number, due in greater part to the placing of foreign orders here. Our immediate problem is to superimpose on this production capacity a greatly increased additional production capacity. I should like to see this nation geared up to the ability to turn out at least 50,000 planes a year.”

**FDR**  
**“Ominous Days”**  
**May 16, 1940**



UNCLE: 'IT WOULD BE DYNAMITE IF I DIDN'T'

# Ukraine Security Investments/Industrial Base Expansion (19 December 2024)



UNCLASSIFIED // AS OF: 19 DECEMBER 2024

## UKRAINE SECURITY ASSISTANCE

### U.S. COMMITMENTS

Total U.S. Security Assistance Committed Since Russia's Full-Scale Invasion on February 24, 2022



Commitments also include a wide range of other vehicles, unmanned aerial systems, small arms, communications equipment, protective gear, and other supplies and services. *The United States continues to work with its Allies and partners to provide Ukraine with additional capabilities to defend itself.*

### ACQUISITION ACTIONS

Rapidly Producing and Procuring Systems using Undefined Contract Actions (UCAs), Indefinite Delivery / Indefinite Quantity (IDIQ) Contracts, and Other Tools

#### Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative

Procuring defense articles directly from industry to support Ukraine

#### Ukraine Presidential Drawdown Replacement Initiative

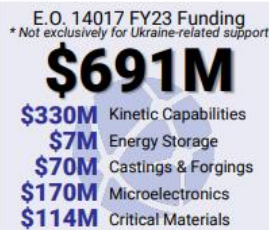
Replacing equipment drawn down from U.S. stocks



<sup>1</sup> Includes all acquisition-related obligations, including services, transportation, and administrative costs  
<sup>2</sup> Denotes all amounts for which the Department has notified Congress on its intended use

### INDUSTRIAL BASE EXPANSION

Increasing Critical Capability Manufacturing Capacity



UNCLASSIFIED

## UKRAINE SECURITY ASSISTANCE

### USAI CONTRACTING ACTIONS

Equipment <sup>1</sup>	Obligated (\$M)	Δ (16 Oct 24)	Awardee(s)
155mm Ammunition	1,855	0	Various Suppliers
Other Ammunition	2,577	0	Various Suppliers
APKWS	603	- 1	BAE Systems
NASAMS	1,132	0	Raytheon
Other Air Defense Systems / Missiles	4,940	+ 6	Various Suppliers
HIMARS	296	0	Lockheed Martin
M777	470	0	Various Suppliers
VAMPIRE	56	0	L3Harris
Other cJAS Systems	512	0	Various Suppliers
Phoenix Ghost	581	0	AEVEX
PUMA UAS	318	0	AeroVironment
Switchblade 300 / 600	102	0	AeroVironment
Radars	312	0	Various Suppliers
Radio and Communications Equipment	1,143	0	Various Suppliers
Combat and Tactical Vehicles	1,772	+ 4	Various Suppliers
Maritime Craft	30	0	Various Suppliers
Other <sup>2</sup>	4,510	+ 4	Various Suppliers
<b>Total Awarded <sup>3</sup></b>	<b>21,209</b>	<b>+ 13</b>	

As of 19 December 2024. (1) Includes supporting equipment, including component parts, training manuals, spares, etc. Some smaller components may have different awardees. (2) Includes personal protective equipment (PPE), medical supplies, transportation, spare parts, and other services. (3) Total may not reflect sum of individual amounts due to rounding.

### REPLACEMENT CONTRACTING ACTIONS

Equipment <sup>1</sup>	Obligated (\$M)	Δ (16 Oct 24)	Awardee(s) <sup>2</sup>
Air Defense	4,647	+ 946	Lockheed Martin, RTX
Ammunition	1,014	+ 266	Various Suppliers
Artillery Rounds & Components	7,972	+ 1,837	American Ordnance, General Dynamics, RTX, IMT Defense, CONCO
Combat and Tactical Vehicles	5,345	+ 352	AM General, BAE, General Dynamics, Oshkosh
Counterfire Radar	372	0	Lockheed Martin
Demolition	101	+ 4	Various Suppliers
HIMARS	849	+ 1	Lockheed Martin
Howitzers	88	- 1	Various Suppliers
Man-Portable Rockets	2,588	+ 43	Various Suppliers
Maritime Craft	100	+ 13	Various Suppliers
Mortars / Mortar Systems	112	+ 1	Various Suppliers
Operational / Logistics Support & Transportation	1,735	- 1	Various Suppliers
Soldier Weapons / Equipment	705	+ 107	Various Suppliers
Strike Munitions	3,939	+ 928	Boeing, Lockheed Martin, RTX
UAS	93	+ 72	AeroVironment
<b>Total Awarded <sup>3</sup></b>	<b>29,660</b>	<b>+ 4,568</b>	

As of 19 December 2024. (1) Includes supporting equipment, including component parts, training manuals, spares, etc. Some smaller components may have different awardees. (2) Major vendors, non-exhaustive list. (3) Total may not reflect sum of individual amounts due to rounding.

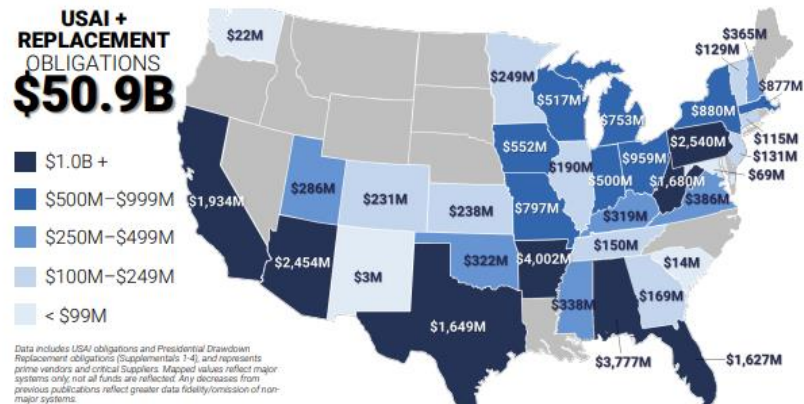


UNCLASSIFIED // AS OF: 19 DECEMBER 2024

## UKRAINE SECURITY ASSISTANCE

### INDUSTRIAL BASE IMPACTS

USAI + REPLACEMENT OBLIGATIONS **\$50.9B**



Data includes USAI obligations and Presidential Drawdown Replacement obligations (Supplementals 1-4), and represents prime vendors and critical suppliers. Mapped values reflect major systems only; not all funds are reflected. Any decreases from previous publications reflect greater data fidelity/omission of non-major systems.

### DIRECT INDUSTRIAL INVESTMENTS



Data includes Ukraine Supplemental funds directly invested to improve industrial base production capacity (Supplementals 1-6), and represents government- and contractor-owned facilities and critical suppliers. Mapped values reflect major systems only; not all funds are reflected.

# World War III is likely to be a Protracted War

- 1) To deter World War III, we must be prepared to win it.
- 2) Much of success in protracted war will rely on logistics and production, but US defense industrial base is “fragile and hollow” (Zelikow, *TNSR*)
- 3) Post-Cold-War drawdown left us with minimal capacity to produce low-end armaments (155mm rounds)
- 4) US way of war depends on exquisite weapons systems (missiles, ships, tanks, aircraft), but producing them requires long lead times
- 5) Casualties likely to be very high (Two weeks=20 years). IRR 750K in 1973, 75K today
- 6) The time to take this seriously is now, for both the Defense Industrial Base and manpower (Draft)



Newly commissioned Navy ensigns take oath of office during Naval Academy's Class of 2023 graduation ceremony at Navy-Marine Corps Stadium, Annapolis, Maryland, May 26, 2023 (DOD/Chad J. McNeelley)

## Was 50 Years Long Enough? The All-Volunteer Force in an Era of Large-Scale Combat Operations

By Kent W. Park and John A. Nagl

In an era of geopolitical competition among major powers, a large-scale war could last longer and result in more casualties than anything the United States has experienced since World War II. It is unclear whether the all-volunteer force (AVF) that the

Colonel Kent W. Park, USA, is Commander of Joint Base Lewis-McChord. Lieutenant Colonel John A. Nagl, USA (Ret.), Ph.D., is Professor of Warfighting Studies at the U.S. Army War College.

United States has relied on for the past 50 years, with extraordinary and unexpected success, can meet the manpower requirements in quality and quantity and in time to win the large-scale combat operations that the Department of Defense (DOD) is preparing for.

Current U.S. Army doctrine recommends planning for a sustained casualty replacement rate of approximately 800 per day per theater during large-scale combat operations (LSCO).<sup>1</sup> That is 24,000 people per month for one theater. Recent

simulations run by the Army's Mission Command Training Program consistently produced 50,000 to 55,000 casualties in corps- and division-level battles.<sup>2</sup> In a war game run by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, casualty estimates ranged from around 7,000 to 10,000 in just the initial 3 to 4 weeks of what was primarily a sea and air battle.<sup>3</sup>

These large casualty estimates are also reflected in the current conflict in Ukraine, with the Russians estimated to have suffered between 290,000 and

These conclusions draw on “Winning the Long War: How to Prepare for, Fight and Win a Protracted War with the PLA in the Indo-Pacific, 2025-2035”, an Integrated Research Project led by Dr. Jerad Harper at the USAWC in 2024, and on my own “Ukraine War Lessons Learned” IRP during AY23 and AY24.

## Conclusion & Key Takeaways

- War is unpredictable and highly contingent – Fog, Friction, and Chance
- Kremlin views world through security lens – alternative to Putin may be worse
- Xi is learning from the Ukraine war—but what is he learning?
- Character of warfare is changing – Army can and must learn from conflict
- Modern LSCO's are costly and pose unique set of challenges



# World War III?

- Tim Snyder suggests that it's 1938, when Neville Chamberlain surrendered Czechoslovakia to the Nazis—but this time, the Czechs are fighting back.
- If it's 1938, and World War III is going to start next year,  
WHAT SHOULD WE DO TO PREPARE?

DISCUSS.