



# Could Four Simmering Global Crises Boil Over?

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By Arthur Waldron

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*Abstract: More than once, I have heated milk on a gas stove only to have it boil over disastrously. The U.S. and its allies face at least four major and converging challenges that may also boil over like overheated milk, perhaps simultaneously. Social scientists will have more sophisticated frameworks, but this homely analogy of the full gas stove frames my points.*

Think of the developing international possibilities as four saucepans of milk sitting on an old-fashioned gas stove. One is labeled “Middle East”; one is labeled “Russia and the near abroad”; one is labeled “China and her neighbors,” and the last, “Domestic terrorism.” Each saucepan sits on a ring; under it the flame is set on “high.” We all know what happens given such an arrangement: the milk boils over in messy, soaking surges that are more than a nuisance to clean up.

Just as importantly, our four saucepans will not boil over in a neat sequence, allowing the world to try to turn down one and clean up, then address a second, and so forth, in logical order. Rather, all will overflow near simultaneously meaning that if the necessary steps are taken to deal with one—and we may not have the resources even to do that—then the others by necessity will be left unattended, with perhaps catastrophic consequences.

This essay will seek to do three things. First it will look in a little more detail at the four saucepans, how they have arrived on the stove, and their possible futures. Then it will highlight the three weaknesses of our current situation. One, we lack any coherent global strategy or planning for what lies ahead. Two, our force structure is so reduced that intervening decisively in even one of the potential contingencies is probably impossible, and three, even had we the force structure, we would still lack—and this is most important—the cadre of high level leadership, perhaps having

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served in the military, but tempered through many crises, and knowledgeable about war and strategy, who would know instinctively what to do when a crisis unfolds.

Finally we will consider how the challenges of the military situation we have described may affect and perhaps alter the alliance structures that currently define world politics. In the background, of course, but little mentioned, will be the parlous state of our economy with its unprecedented levels of debt, which, as much as military and strategic inadequacy, undermines our status as a power.

Let us begin by briefly reviewing the calculations and miscalculation that have brought us to this point. These began in the 1970s, when Washington and Beijing's seemed to reconcile, a development that was greeted universally as an augury of decades of peace. Optimism was reinforced when the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, seemingly causing the Cold War and nuclear terror to vanish as if miraculously. Furthermore, the USSR's dissolution and the construction of a new order in Europe proved deceptively easy: most states, from Poland to Georgia to Mongolia became independent, entering the mainstream of liberal global politics and economic growth. In 1994, Ukraine was guaranteed territorial security by the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances, signed by Britain, France, China, Russia, and the United States—a seemingly credible group—at the price of handing over her advanced arsenal of nuclear weapons. The difficult work seemed completed. The nightmares that had haunted the Cold War years were banished. New vistas of cooperation, and a rising global living standard beckoned. These developments, however, proved to be a false dawn.

### **The Military Balance Begins to Shift Against the West**

In 2011, the U.S. Congress passed and President Barack Obama signed the Budget Control Act, requiring one trillion dollars in military spending budget cuts over ten years (i.e., by 2021 the situation may become perilous).<sup>1</sup> The cuts were based on a complacent sense that no one would challenge the United States and the West, as well as misplaced confidence in the overwhelming capabilities of our technology. One example may be seen in the procurement of the F-22, our most capable fighter aircraft. Originally the Air Force envisioned a purchase of 750 planes. When deliveries ceased, our total inventory had been cut to 182. The last aircraft was delivered in 2011.<sup>2</sup>

Shortly thereafter, France announced seven percent military spending cuts for 2014-2019.<sup>3</sup> Since 2010, Britain has cut her defense spending by roughly 12

<sup>1</sup> John McCain and Mac Thornberry, "America's Dangerous Defense Cuts," *Wall Street Journal*, March 9, 2015, [www.wsj.com/articles/john-mccain-and-mac-thornberry-americas-dangerous-defense-cuts-1425943297](http://www.wsj.com/articles/john-mccain-and-mac-thornberry-americas-dangerous-defense-cuts-1425943297).

<sup>2</sup> Dave Majumdar, "USAF receives last F-22 Raptor," *Flightglobal*, May 3, 2002, [flightglobal.com/news/articles/in-focus-usaf-receives-last-f-22-raptor-371401/](http://flightglobal.com/news/articles/in-focus-usaf-receives-last-f-22-raptor-371401/).

<sup>3</sup> Fenella McGerty, "French defence budget boost swaps a 7% cut for a 4% jump," *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, April 29, 2015, [www.janes.com/article/51079/french-defence-budget-boost-swaps-a-7-cut-for-a-4-jump](http://www.janes.com/article/51079/french-defence-budget-boost-swaps-a-7-cut-for-a-4-jump).

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