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AMERICA'S THIN RED LINE

Threshold Conditioning and the Exploitation
of U.S. Strategic Overextension

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How constrained American capacity can weaken allied readiness and create
opportunities for cumulative coercion.



CHALLENGE THE ASSUMPTION
TEST THE SYSTEM
IDENTIFY THE CONSEQUENCE

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Key Judgement

America's adversaries do not need to defeat its armed forces outright to weaken the credibility of its global commitments. They can seek to exploit the gap between those commitments and the forces Washington can deploy, sustain and replace.

Repeated demands across several theatres can consume scarce capacity, narrow political choices and encourage acceptance of behaviour previously considered unacceptable. When that pressure changes the defender's expectations and responses over time, strategic overextension becomes an opening for **Threshold Conditioning**.

The consequences extend throughout America's alliance network. Allies dependent on constrained U.S. production may struggle to obtain weapons, replenish ammunition or maintain equipment. Their ability to contribute to collective defence can then decline, increasing the burden on the United States.

For Australia, the central planning question is whether sufficient capability - Australian and allied - will be available when required, for as long as required.

From Military Superiority to Strategic Availability

My recent LinkedIn article comparing American military power in 1945 and 2026 raised a question that aggregate measures of technological superiority cannot settle: **how much usable force can the United States concentrate and sustain against competing demands?**

The historical comparison has limits. A modern warship is not the equivalent of a Second World War vessel, and a fully mobilised wartime economy is an imperfect benchmark for a contemporary standing force. Precision weapons, sensors, communications and undersea capabilities profoundly change what individual platforms can achieve. Raw ship or personnel totals cannot establish the outcome of a modern conflict.

Nevertheless, capability still depends on availability.

A highly capable platform has finite time on station, ammunition and maintenance capacity. Moving it to one theatre can reduce the options available elsewhere. Replacing it requires functioning production lines, skilled workers and suppliers. An appropriation alone cannot supply these.

Overseas bases can improve access and sustainment, but their number does not establish how much combat power is available. What matters is the capacity to deliver and sustain the required effect, in the required place, at the required time.

There is a documented industrial basis for concern. In March 2025, the U.S. Government Accountability Office reported that the Navy had failed to achieve its planned fleet growth despite a near doubling of its shipbuilding budget over two decades. It identified persistent delivery delays, cost growth, infrastructure limitations and shortages of experienced workers.[1]

GAO's April 2026 testimony again described shipbuilding programmes running years behind schedule and billions of dollars over cost. It also found that the submarine industrial base had not met construction goals in recent years.[2]

These findings establish constraints on expanding capacity. They do not demonstrate that the United States cannot fight a major war. They do, however, challenge assumptions that additional capacity can be generated quickly enough to meet every competing requirement.

When Industrial Dependence Weakens the Alliance

American industrial constraints extend into allied armed forces that depend on U.S.-supplied weapons, ammunition, spare parts and support equipment.

When urgent American requirements compete with allied orders for limited output, allies face a risk of longer waits, constrained replenishment and deferred capability. Washington's April 2025 executive order on foreign defence sales explicitly required priority transfers to avoid significant harm to U.S. force readiness, while also seeking stronger allied burden-sharing.[3]

This creates an allocation tension. It does not establish an automatic rule that every American order precedes every allied one. It does mean that allies should plan for circumstances in which protecting American readiness limits the availability or timing of supply.

Production problems can also affect shared programmes without a decision to favour American customers. GAO reported in September 2025 that all 110 F-35 aircraft delivered in 2024 were late, with hardware and software upgrades the principal driver.[4] This demonstrates a shared delivery vulnerability, rather than proof of preferential allocation.

The strategic danger is cumulative.

If allies cannot replace expended munitions, obtain essential components or field planned capabilities, their usable strength can decline relative to operational demands and adversary capability. They become less able to defend their interests or support agreed American strategic objectives.

Washington must then cover a larger share of the burden or accept gaps in collective defence.

Pressure on American industry can therefore weaken allied capacity in ways that generate still greater demands on American forces and production.

Two complementary responses are necessary: alternative sources of defence products and domestic capacity to manufacture, maintain and repair selected weapons and support equipment.

Neither follows automatically from buying a different platform or announcing a local assembly line. Alternative suppliers may share the same upstream bottlenecks. Domestic production requires secure component supplies, technical data, licences, testing facilities, skilled workers and sustained orders.

Priorities should reflect the operational consequences of interrupted supply. These include less visible necessities such as spares, ground-support equipment and repair tooling, alongside major weapons systems.

Across Western defence industries, fiscal constraints, skills shortages and industrial bottlenecks limit how quickly alternatives can expand. The European Council has called for measures to remove barriers to production growth, while the Council's 2026 skills recommendation explicitly identifies defence among strategically important sectors affected by workforce shortages.[5][6]

Conditions differ between countries and products. Shifting orders abroad is not a general escape from scarcity.

SAGE assesses that rebuilding resilient industrial depth across the alliance is a **generational undertaking**. Under sustained fiscal, workforce and supply-chain constraints, comprehensive resolution within a generation cannot be assumed. Particular production lines can improve much sooner, but additional expenditure alone cannot rapidly reproduce entire industrial ecosystems.

Defence planning should therefore account for persistent constraints while pursuing achievable gains now.

This feedback loop strengthens the Threshold Conditioning problem. Opponents may gain opportunities as both American capacity and allied substitutes become harder to sustain. Industrial dependence creates exposure; it becomes conditioning when pressure on that exposure produces enduring changes in allied choices or willingness to resist.

How Overextension Enables Threshold Conditioning

Threshold Conditioning describes a process through which repeated pressure progressively alters what a target regards as normal, tolerable or worth resisting.

Its distinguishing feature is the cumulative change in behaviour. A provocation alone is not evidence of successful conditioning.

An adversary seeking to exploit limited American availability could proceed through four connected stages.

1. Create recurring demands

Maritime harassment, coercive exercises, cyber disruption and threats to commercial routes can require surveillance, protection and political attention without necessarily triggering a major military response. Each incident may appear manageable in isolation.

2. Impose recurring costs

Responses can occupy ships and aircraft, consume defensive munitions, extend deployments or divert scarce intelligence and logistics support. Even successful interception or reassurance can carry an opportunity cost.

The relevant comparison is the strategic value of protection against the resources consumed and the alternatives forgone.

3. Learn from allocation choices

An adversary can observe which activities produce reinforcement, which elicit diplomatic protest and which become routine. It can adjust the intensity, location and timing of pressure accordingly.

Several opponents may exploit these opportunities independently. Simultaneous pressure does not, by itself, establish a unified campaign or common command.

4. Consolidate a changed baseline

The danger arises when temporary restraint becomes an enduring expectation: coercive patrols are accepted as routine, restrictions on access persist, or allies begin to accommodate pressure because support appears uncertain.

At this point, an operational burden has helped produce a political result.

This is the proposed causal link between overextension and Threshold Conditioning. Resource scarcity can make repeated resistance harder; repeated difficulty can encourage accommodation; accommodation can create space for further pressure.

None of these steps is automatic. Political resolve, economical defensive measures and allied burden-sharing can interrupt the sequence.

Consider an illustrative scenario involving simultaneous pressure on a commercial shipping route and coercive activity near an allied state. Washington may retain the ability to prevail in either theatre while facing difficult choices about sustained coverage in both.

Conditioning would be evident only if the resulting allocation decisions helped an opponent secure lasting changes in access, conduct or allied expectations. The scenario illustrates the mechanism; it is not evidence that a coordinated campaign is already occurring.

What Would Confirm - or Weaken - the Assessment?

Analysts should track three relationships:

- The frequency of coercive activity and the response it generates.
- The burden of that response relative to replenishment and force recovery.
- Subsequent changes in political behaviour or practical access.

Allied delivery delays, availability of critical spares, replenishment rates and evidence of competing production priorities should form part of that assessment.

Evidence would strengthen the assessment if repeated pressure coincided with reduced protection, increasingly permissive responses and durable adversary gains. Attribution still matters: a deliberate policy adjustment, a maintenance cycle or a diplomatic settlement may explain a change without demonstrating conditioning.

The assessment would weaken if the United States and its partners sustained access, replenished expended resources and denied cumulative gains while reducing the cost of responding.

Successful deterrence can include selective restraint. The test is whether restraint preserves strategic freedom or progressively surrenders it.

Australia's Exposure

Australia should treat American willingness and American availability as separate planning questions.

Washington may remain committed to an ally while facing competing requirements for the same ships, aircraft, munitions or industrial output. Alliance confidence cannot remove those allocation choices.

Australian vulnerability also extends beyond the arrival of combat forces. Disruption to fuel, shipping, communications, repair services or imported components can narrow Canberra's options before a direct military confrontation. A force capable of deploying initially may still struggle to sustain a prolonged response.

Australia's 2026 National Defence Strategy, as outlined by Defence, emphasises deterrence, self-reliance, national resilience, sovereign industry and stronger partnerships.[7] The practical test is how these objectives translate into usable endurance under concurrent pressure.

SAGE proposes four priorities.

1. Plan explicitly for constrained reinforcement

Exercise scenarios in which American assistance arrives later, in smaller quantities or with competing demands on support. Identify which Australian missions must continue independently and where allied dependence remains unavoidable.

These assumptions should inform acquisition and readiness decisions.

2. Fund endurance alongside major platforms

Assess fuel availability, munitions depth, repair capacity, trained personnel, dispersal and resilient communications against operational requirements.

Measure investment by the additional days of useful activity and recovery capacity it provides. Sovereign capability must include the ability to keep equipment operating.

3. Diversify supply and build selective domestic production

Identify critical weapons, components and support equipment for which interrupted American supply would curtail Australian operations.

Develop qualified alternative suppliers and domestic manufacturing, maintenance and repair capacity for the highest-priority items. Secure the necessary technical rights and component access, and use sustained orders and partner cooperation to support viable production.

Practical regional arrangements should also expand surveillance, logistics and repair options. Dependence is reduced only when alternatives can function under the same crisis conditions that constrain U.S. supply.

4. Assess coercion cumulatively

Use existing national security machinery to connect military, diplomatic, cyber and economic reporting.

Regular reviews should ask whether ostensibly separate incidents are changing access, imposing unsustainable costs or normalising restrictions on Australian choices. Ministers need proportionate response options tied to the cumulative effect, with attribution confidence and escalation risks made explicit.

Long-term programmes, including AUKUS, should be assessed alongside these nearer-term requirements. Promised future capability cannot perform a present mission. Equally, industrial difficulty does not by itself settle the strategic value of a programme.

The policy requirement is a credible path through the intervening years, with measurable milestones and workable contingencies.

Strategic Outlook

Technological superiority remains a powerful advantage, but its strategic value depends on the ability to make capability available repeatedly and sustainably. An adversary may seek to exploit that requirement by making resistance costly, recurrent and politically exhausting.

America's thin red line is the margin between its commitments and its capacity to sustain them under simultaneous pressure.

That margin narrows further when allies dependent on the same stressed industrial base cannot sustain their own contribution. Threshold Conditioning can exploit it when repeated allocation choices become a pattern of accommodation.

For Australia, a stronger alliance contribution begins with greater national endurance and clearer judgement about which cumulative changes must be resisted.

The objective is to preserve the ability to choose and act before coercion has made accommodation seem inevitable.

References

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Analytical note: This brief presents a strategic assessment. The sources support the industrial and Australian policy context; the Threshold Conditioning mechanism, illustrative scenario and policy recommendations are SAGE analysis. The brief does not provide a classified readiness assessment or a quantitative estimate of simultaneous-war capacity.

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