

# The First Offset

By Peter Grier

Adversaries have been watching the US military carefully for decades and have seen the military advantages provided by stealthy aircraft, precision guided munitions, and space-based reconnaissance and navigation capabilities. Now America's potential and actual enemies want some of that for themselves—and they are developing technologies and strategies to duplicate or counter the US advantages.

That is why the Department of Defense is moving to a “third offset” approach to leap ahead in defense technologies. Officials are emphasizing robotics, artificial intelligence, miniaturization, and other new areas in an attempt to maintain the US status as the most advanced military on the planet, bar none.

This is called a third offset because it is modeled on two previous offset leaps. The first was the move to a nuclear-based New Look deterrence strategy in the wake of the Korean War. The second was the development of stealth, PGMs, and other current technologies in the 1970s and 1980s as a means of countering the Warsaw Pact's numerically superior conventional forces in the late stages of the Cold War.

A closer look at the third offset's ancestors provides important lessons about how to proceed in the modern era. The first offset, in particular, offers parallels to the position of today.

**T**he first US offset strategy—to counter the numerical strength of military adversaries with technical innovation—began to take shape in the middle of the Pacific Ocean in early December 1952.

President-elect Dwight D. Eisenhower was returning from Korea, a trip he'd promised to make during the campaign. The bitter Korean War was locked in a stalemate and Eisenhower worried it was draining off US resources and affecting national morale. Clearly America could not afford many such regional conflicts.

Ike had brought several top incoming Administration officials with him to look at the Korean problem firsthand. More joined the party in Guam for the sail home aboard the heavy cruiser USS *Helena*. Eisenhower's idea was that three days at sea would be a good time for them all to get

to know each other before the demands of office began occupying their time.

The setting was not propitious. *Helena* was the flagship of the Pacific Fleet but still a warship, not a passenger liner. Their conference room was “antiseptically spare and cold,” speechwriter Emmet J. Hughes wrote later in his memoirs.

Nor did Eisenhower immediately warm to all his new advisors. Secretary of State-designate John Foster Dulles tended to drone on in a legalistic manner, causing a bored Ike to stare fixedly at an upper corner of the room.

But the meetings proved significant. They talked about the war and much else—“everything you can think of that might in any way involve the things we were embarking upon,” Treasury Secretary George M. Humphrey said later.

Two presentations in particular shaped a wide-ranging discussion of possible changes in the nation's grand strategy for the Cold War. Adm. Arthur W. Radford, chief of the Pacific Fleet, said it was costly and inefficient to try to contain the Soviet Union with a ring of scattered American forces. And Dulles pushed for greater reliance on America's growing nuclear stockpile as a means to deter Soviet-backed expansionism.

Neither point was new to Eisenhower. But he began thinking more deeply about how the problem of the first might be solved by the solution of the second, given the context of what he'd recently seen on the Korean front lines.

“It was here that the ideas came together, that Eisenhower's concerns blended in with Dulles' solution. ... The ‘New Look’ in national defense policy was born,” writes journalist and historian Fred Kaplan in his book on the development of nuclear policy, *The Wizards of Armageddon*.

The basic problem, as Eisenhower and some of his top aides saw it, was that the geopolitical situation they were inheriting from outgoing President Harry Truman was structured in a way that favored the Soviet Union.



In the 1950s, the US faced overwhelming Soviet land forces. Eisenhower turned to nuclear weapons to offset the communist advantage.

They had little doubt that the Kremlin's hand was behind the Korean War. They believed Moscow was happy to see the US and its Free World allies throw men and treasure into a peripheral conflict in East Asia. What if the USSR's strategy was to provoke more such wars at a time and place of its own choosing?

That would play to the Soviet's already-overwhelming lead in conventional forces. On the European central front the USSR could muster around 175 divisions, according to contemporary CIA estimates. Moscow had another 125 reserve divisions it could deploy within a month.

The US did not need to match this number unit-for-unit due to America's higher quality weapons and troops. But at the time it fielded an Active Duty total of 29 Army and Marine Corps ground divisions, with another seven or so in reserve. The disparity in forces was so large that a buildup, by itself, did not seem a viable solution.

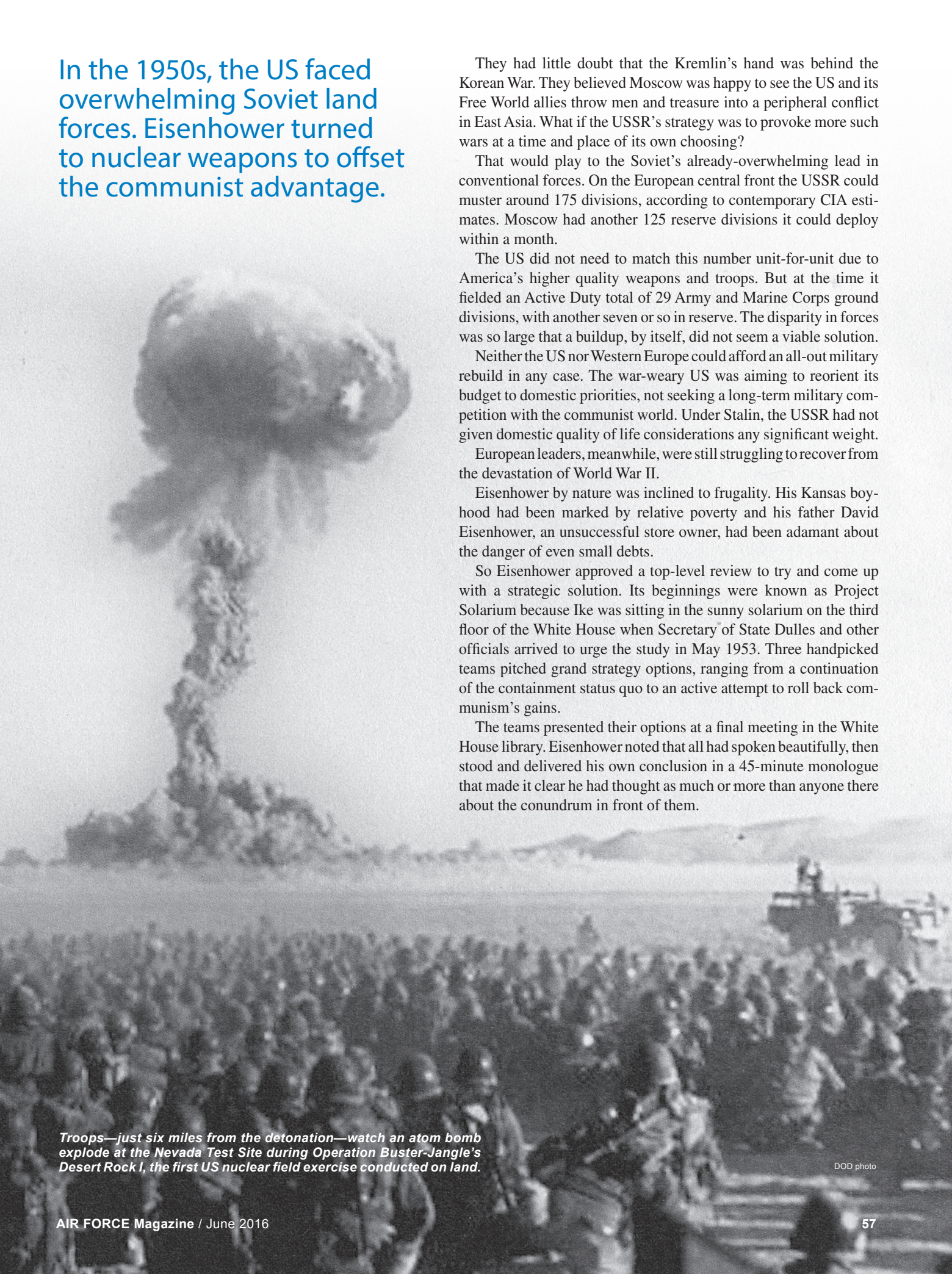
Neither the US nor Western Europe could afford an all-out military rebuild in any case. The war-weary US was aiming to reorient its budget to domestic priorities, not seeking a long-term military competition with the communist world. Under Stalin, the USSR had not given domestic quality of life considerations any significant weight.

European leaders, meanwhile, were still struggling to recover from the devastation of World War II.

Eisenhower by nature was inclined to frugality. His Kansas boyhood had been marked by relative poverty and his father David Eisenhower, an unsuccessful store owner, had been adamant about the danger of even small debts.

So Eisenhower approved a top-level review to try and come up with a strategic solution. Its beginnings were known as Project Solarium because Ike was sitting in the sunny solarium on the third floor of the White House when Secretary of State Dulles and other officials arrived to urge the study in May 1953. Three handpicked teams pitched grand strategy options, ranging from a continuation of the containment status quo to an active attempt to roll back communism's gains.

The teams presented their options at a final meeting in the White House library. Eisenhower noted that all had spoken beautifully, then stood and delivered his own conclusion in a 45-minute monologue that made it clear he had thought as much or more than anyone there about the conundrum in front of them.



*Troops—just six miles from the detonation—watch an atom bomb explode at the Nevada Test Site during Operation Buster-Jangle's Desert Rock I, the first US nuclear field exercise conducted on land.*

DOD photo



USAF photos

“He showed his intellectual ascendancy over every man in the room,” said diplomat George F. Kennan, a study participant who had thought Ike nothing but a dull war hero.

In the end Eisenhower chose the containment option—but with a twist. The US would counter the Soviet Union’s threat to expand its influence outward with the threat of a response with nuclear weapons. It was a strategy of asymmetry: Future Koreans might be met, not with a conventional defense in the region in question, but with an atomic strike at a time and place of Washington’s choosing.

The economy of this approach was one thing that recommended it to Eisenhower, according to Gen. Andrew J. Goodpaster, an Army officer who participated in the study and later served as Supreme Allied Commander, Europe. It allowed him to proceed with reductions in military budgets.

But it was not all about the money. It was at least as much about technology’s march.

“I think it came from the conviction on Eisenhower’s part that we were in the nuclear age and that the nuclear com-

ponent of war had really already, even then, become a dominant component,” Goodpaster said in a 1975 oral history on file at the Eisenhower Library. “The Pentagon and its major component elements were far from having made the adjustment to that kind of concept.”

### MAXIMUM DETERRENT

The Eisenhower Administration dubbed its revamped strategy the New Look, borrowing the phrase from Christian Dior’s sleek New Look fashions of the era. It was outlined officially in NSC 162/2, issued in October 1953. Dulles explained it in a famous speech in January of 1954 at the wood-paneled establishment redoubt of the Council on Foreign Relations. To counter the “mighty landpower” of communist foes, the US would rely on the “massive retaliatory power” of its burgeoning nuclear stockpile, said the Secretary of State.

“We want for ourselves, and the other free nations, a maximum deterrent at a bearable cost,” said Dulles.

This swerve made use of a pre-existing US military advantage. At the end of 1952 the US had 841 atomic warheads avail-

able, while the Soviets had an estimated 120. Moreover, the US stockpile was increasing twice as fast, with the nation’s atomic infrastructure producing several hundred new weapons annually. And the US had already successfully tested a thermonuclear device. This new H-bomb was so powerful it dwarfed existing atomic bombs in destructive potential and seemed destined to change the very nature of nuclear deterrence.

US nuclear delivery capability also far surpassed that of the USSR. The US Air Force was already fielding long-range jet-powered bombers, as the six-engine B-47 Stratojet began entering service in 1951. The B-52 Stratofortress was under development with delivery of operational aircraft to begin in 1955.

In contrast Soviet bombers were still stuck in the prop age. The USSR had no air bases anywhere close to its superpower opponent, while the US could count on European and Asian allies to provide bases ringing the Soviet perimeter.

In budgetary terms the New Look was good for the Air Force. Its projected size grew from a total of 95 wings under the last Truman budget to 137 total wings under



*Far left: An Aug. 2, 1958, test launch of an Atlas intercontinental ballistic missile. Left: An instructor pilot briefs a crew from the 407th Combat Crew Training Squadron, Castle AFB, Calif., before taking off on a training mission in a B-52. Above: European leaders were doubtful that the US would launch a nuclear strike should Soviet tanks, such as these T-54Bs, roll westward through the continent.*

initial Eisenhower estimates, with 92 of those assigned to Strategic Air Command.

From 1954 through 1957 the Air Force received about 47 percent of total Department of Defense appropriations, while the Navy received 29 percent and the Army 22 percent, according to figures compiled by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments. During the same period the Army's end strength shrank by some 40 percent.

Meanwhile, the New Look was successful in overall budgetary terms. US spending on the function of national defense for the era peaked in 1953, as Eisenhower took office, according to historical budget tables. It then dropped in stages, bottoming out at \$42.5 billion in Fiscal 1956.

The 1953 defense budget accounted for almost 14 percent of US GDP. By 1956 this measure had dropped to 9.7 percent. Thus the economic weight of the military budget grew lighter by a third during Eisenhower's first term.

But within a relatively short period of time the original formulation of New Look was under political and technological pressure. Critics, including top Army

officers, questioned whether the doctrine of massive nuclear retaliation was credible. Would the US really trade Chicago for Berlin, if it came to that? They pressed for a more flexible doctrine that allowed for more limited responses under more limited circumstances.

#### **"GAP" SCARE**

The Soviets were not standing still in terms of developing their own nuclear forces. The USSR tested a thermonuclear device in 1953. Preliminary versions of a jet-propelled bomber, dubbed the M-4 Bison, appeared a year later.

"Within a few years, the Soviet Union used the fruits of advanced military technology to increase greatly its striking power and put the Eisenhower policy in doubt," wrote Air Force historian George F. Lemmer in a formerly secret 1967 study, "The Air Force and Strategic Deterrence: 1951-1960."

When they made the original decision to implement the New Look policy Eisenhower and other top officials knew full well that the USSR would develop its own strategic nuclear capabilities. They trusted that the pace of US technological progress would remain robust, providing a continually upgraded deterrent edge. In most respects that proved true. The USSR did not stand still militarily, but USAF's nuclear forces advanced at least as rapidly as the opposition.

In the early years New Look meant rapid introduction of hydrogen bombs into SAC, to be carried by a growing force of modern B-52s. Aerial refueling capability expanded with the deployment of KC-135s, allowing more flexible basing. The Air Force pressed forward with development of liquid-fueled Atlas and Titan ICBMs.

Early warning radars were integrated into a continentwide defensive network. Eventually solid-fueled Minuteman ICBMs followed on the heels of the liquid-fueled nuclear missiles. The land-based parts of the US strategic nuclear deterrent began to roughly resemble those of today.

As the 1960s neared, the US strategic nuclear force was still far more capable than its Soviet equivalent. US warheads outnumbered those of the USSR by 10 to one. Some of Moscow's weaponry was illusory: The M-4 Bison jet bomber, which first appeared in a 1954 May Day parade in Moscow, gulped so much fuel it was an impractical strategic asset. Only a few were deployed.

For a long-range bomber, the Soviets relied on the Tu-95 Bear, a turboprop aircraft of the same vintage as the B-52 that, like the BUFF, remains in service today.

But that did not stop "gap" scares from roiling US politics of the period. Following the shock of the 1957 launch of a Soviet ICBM, and then the Sputnik satellite shortly thereafter, Democrats seized on

a perceived “missile gap” as a means to criticize the Eisenhower Administration’s security policies.

“It is not very reassuring to be told that next year we will put a ‘better’ satellite in the air,” said Senate Majority Leader Lyndon B. Johnson. “Perhaps it will even have chrome trim and automatic windshield wipers.”

Eisenhower knew there was no basis for much of this gap panic. He just could not say so in public, since his knowledge was based on photography from secret U-2 spyplane flights over Soviet territory.

In any case, Ike’s most acute problems in regard to New Look came from inside the government. Other services—particularly the Army—had never accepted the premise of massive retaliation and continued to argue against it. By the middle of the 1950s Secretary of State Dulles began to agree with them. He had heard European allies question over and over again whether the US would really jump into general nuclear war if Soviet tanks rolled westward.

In the end, Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, Army Chief of Staff, emerged as the main internal critic of the New Look. A World War II paratrooper and model soldier-scholar, Taylor was articulate and unafraid to debate his Commander in Chief.

Eisenhower’s policies had slashed the Army and siphoned off much of its budget, but Taylor’s opposition was based on more than parochial concerns. He genuinely believed that threatening a general atomic response to virtually any Soviet move was a clumsy meat-ax approach. In Taylor’s view, the US might face many different kinds of crises in the years ahead, and leaders needed many different kinds of forces, including large ground forces, to mix-and-match flexible responses.

## GOING FLEXIBLE

In the Administration’s inner councils Eisenhower gradually gave up ground to his critics, writes journalist and author Evan Thomas in his history of the period, *Ike’s Bluff*. He accepted changes in doctrine if not expanded budgets.

“Indeed, the official NSC documents in 1955 and 1956—confidential documents, for internal use, not public consumption—indicated that the policy of the United States was flexible response, or something close to it,” Thomas writes.

USAF photo



**A B-47B makes a rocket-assisted takeoff on April 15, 1954. US bombers and missiles helped keep the Soviet Union at bay for decades.**

But Eisenhower was still the Commander in Chief. In a crisis, it would be him—not Taylor—deciding the appropriate response. Ike never gave up his belief that any serious confrontation with Moscow would inevitably escalate into greater and greater violence. In his experience, that was the nature of war. He thought threatening a nuclear response was the best way to keep those crises from occurring.

Was the first offset successful? From the standpoint of today’s Pentagon officials, it was.

“It’s kind of crazy when you look back and you say, ‘Wow, you know, we were planning to drop so many nuclear bombs everywhere. It was a different time. But it did provide a credible deterrence, without question,’” said Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert O. Work in a 2015 speech on offset strategies. “And it enabled Eisenhower to actually reduce spending from the levels that were originally projected.”

The US may never again have a disruptive technological advantage as profound as that provided by nuclear weapons in the wake of World War II. But there are still lessons applicable to today’s offset strategy that can be drawn from Eisenhower’s experience, according to Robert C. Martinage, a former acting

undersecretary of the Navy who is now an analyst at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments.

One lesson is a need for a balanced strategy capable of handling a full range of military threats. While that may seem counter to the expressed intent of the Ike-era massive retaliation policy, experience bears it out.

“Nuclear weapons provided a cost-effective ‘backstop’ for outnumbered conventional forces—not a wholesale replacement for them,” writes Martinage in a CSBA report, “Toward a New Offset Strategy.”

Other lessons applicable in 2016 include the value of threatening asymmetric punishment and the importance of alliances for burden-sharing and complicating adversary’s planning.

Finally, airpower is key.

“A global air warfare capability can provide valuable strategic freedom of maneuver, complicate an adversary’s defensive planning, and reduce basing vulnerability,” Martinage writes.

The US has been the world’s military technology leader for at least six decades, and as the nation strives to move the technological goalposts forward once again, the Air Force will be front and center in the Third Offset. ★

---

*Peter Grier, a Washington, D.C., editor for the Christian Science Monitor, is a longtime contributor to Air Force Magazine. His most recent article, “Package Q,” appeared in the January issue.*