

The Future of Security Studies

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Scott D. Sagan (Stanford University), **Jacob N. Shapiro** (Princeton University), **Rose McDermott** (Brown University), and **Jennifer Welsh** (McGill University)¹

Additional Signatories: **Deborah Avant** (University of Denver), **James Fearon** (Stanford University), **Peter Feaver** (Duke University), **Taylor Fravel** (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), **Sir Lawrence Freedman** (Kings College London), **Michael Horowitz** (University of Pennsylvania), **Sarah Kreps** (Cornell University), **Steven Miller** (Harvard University), and **Elizabeth Saunders** (Columbia University)

Introduction

Today's global security environment is in a deep crisis. The Russia-Ukraine war shows no signs of slowing down in its fourth year, and new conflicts have started in the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa. Novel types of deadly weapons are being used, existing alliances severely strained, international law increasingly ignored, and new defense-related technologies are being developed without international regulation. During similar crises in the past, including at the most dangerous heights of the Cold War and after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, leading members of the security studies field in universities and think tanks rose to the occasion, producing new ideas, debating alternative policy solutions, consulting with governments, and training experts to help mitigate security risks. In the Cold War, novel ideas such as "strategic stability," the "reciprocal fear of surprise attack," and the "security dilemma" laid the intellectual foundations for nuclear arms control agreements and mutual deterrence. After 9/11, research on civil wars, peace negotiations and peacebuilding, terrorist organizations and other non-state actors, and counterinsurgency informed diplomatic strategies for ending conflict, helped defeat al Qaeda and ISIS, and shaped international aid and peacekeeping.

The field's ability to address today's grave global security crises is challenged, however, by its own organizational crisis. Foundation and government funding for security studies has been significantly reduced at exactly the moment when fundamental changes in the post-Cold War and post-1945 international system demand new thinking. Universities, under siege and facing severe budget cuts, are prioritizing departments and traditional disciplines, rather than the kind of interdisciplinary research and training that is necessary for this moment.

Leaders in the discipline of security studies have a responsibility to determine how the field can rise to the occasion and to identify what resources it needs to play its historic role of helping reduce and manage global risks. In December 2025, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, which convened the Cold War-era meetings that produced the pathbreaking 1960 *Dædalus* Arms Control volume, hosted a meeting of the directors of many leading university research centers, former government officials from both Republican and Democratic administrations, journalists and diplomats, and select philanthropists to discuss the current state of the world and the security studies field.

That convening and subsequent conversations highlighted the need to build a new generation of expertise that can address a moment defined by the resurgence of interstate war, upending of the long-standing post–Cold War order, domestic instability in large democracies, and emergence of new environmental and socio-technical risks. Preparing for this confluence of forces requires pooling expertise to find new policy solutions, revitalizing outdated undergraduate and graduate curricula, and maintaining the international scholarly networks that facilitate cross-pollination between academic, military, and policy communities. This analysis of research priorities and resource needs leads to four practical steps scholars, philanthropists, and universities should take to ensure that the security studies field can continue playing its historical role in supporting peace and security:

1. Devote resources to improving the quality and currency of undergraduate training on security challenges, including innovative pedagogic approaches.
2. Support international and national study groups on the most pressing topics of current and emerging concern.
3. Sustain existing research centers of excellence that undergird the human capital development pipeline for national and global security policy, emphasizing the need for interdisciplinary communities producing innovative policy-relevant research and training of early-career scholars.
4. Invest in interdisciplinary pre- and postdoctoral fellowships that provide a proving ground for new talent and the connective tissue for the security studies ecosystem.

The remainder of this document elaborates on the argument behind these priorities. Section I summarizes what we learned, explains the complex causes of the current crisis in the field, and identifies priorities for support. Section II provides a blueprint for future actions that could improve not only the academic study of security, but also, potentially, lead to concrete advancements in global security. Section III closes by discussing the critical need to make investments now.

I. The Current State of the World and Field

A. The Crises in Global Security

On January 27, 2026, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* set its Doomsday Clock at 85 seconds to midnight, the closest the Clock has ever been to midnight in its history. The Science and Security Board (SASB), which sets the Clock, noted, “Hard-won global understandings are collapsing, accelerating a winner-takes-all great power competition and undermining the international cooperation critical to reducing the risks of nuclear war, climate change, the misuse of biotechnology, the

potential threat of artificial intelligence, and other apocalyptic dangers.”²

Growing nuclear risks are evident. Russia’s President Vladimir Putin has threatened nuclear escalation many times in its war against Ukraine. In summer 2022, the CIA reportedly estimated that the probability of a Russian tactical nuclear strike to stem Ukrainian advances was fifty-fifty. The rapid increase in the size of the nuclear arsenal in China encouraged the United States to reject an extension of the New Start Agreement and promise instead to build

“a golden dome” defense for the country. A new arms race has begun. These changes in policy, combined with the explicit threats President Trump has made to the security and territorial integrity of allies, have led some political leaders in Germany, Poland, South Korea, and even Japan to discuss building their own nuclear weapons. The outcome of war with Iran is currently unknown, but the war has upended global energy markets and has led some leaders in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey to suggest that they might need nuclear weapons in the future for their security.

Conventional war risks are increasing as well. The number of state-based conflicts has almost doubled since 2009,³ the number of armed conflict incidents worldwide in 2025 was twice that in 2021,⁴ and states are targeting civilians at levels not seen since the peak of the Syrian civil war. Autonomous and unmanned weapon systems are proliferating, with more than 450 different groups using drones in attacks since 2020.⁵ Global politics are now defined by the emergence of a revisionist bloc (China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea) whose conflict with the free world has already produced three regional wars. Beyond the threat of war, many newer transnational threats are intensifying, including accelerating climate change, potentially unregulated AI, and the risk of bioemergencies. Coping with these emerging challenges will require more, not less, innovative and interdisciplinary research, which again stretches the attention and resources available.

B. Rapidly Changing International Order

Intensifying security risks are taking place in the context of dramatic changes to the international order. The cumulative effect and likely impact of rapid systemic change are poorly understood. Major changes include:

- An ongoing shift in the relative distribution of power as the U.S. share of global purchasing power decreases, China becomes the world's preeminent

manufacturing power and a major player in technological innovation, and the locus of population and economic growth moves to the Global South.

- Intensifying geopolitical rivalry between China and the United States that is likely to continue regardless of possible short-term trade deals, with leaders in both countries using increasingly zero-sum terms to describe their relationship.
- Shifting international alliances as long-standing commitments and partnerships come into question, including notably U.S. relationships with the EU, NATO, and allies in Asia.
- The reconfiguration of supply chains and economic dependencies, as states seek to manage geopolitical risks and introduce new trade barriers,⁶ including threats to free transit through the Strait of Hormuz in the wake of the war in Iran.
- Global governance regimes breaking down in the security and economic domains, including both the post-Cold War arms control framework and potentially the World Trade Organization's dispute resolution processes.
- Erosion of respect for international law, including the law of armed conflict, as well as the declining power of powerful social “taboos,” as witnessed in the increase in leaders' nuclear threats, threats to target civilian energy infrastructure and desalination plants, and even threats to destroy an entire civilization.
- Declining international cooperation around public health, as exemplified by the United States pulling out of the World Health Organization in January 2026 and the political divisions precipitated by COVID-19, reducing the ability to engage in effective disease surveillance, prevention, and early treatment of emergent pandemic disease as well as intentional use of biological weapons.

None of these changes make increased conflict inevitable, and some may also have pacifying effects. But they collectively mean that we are in a fundamentally different security environment than the Cold War or post-Cold War eras.

C. Domestic Instability

The new international environment is also driven, in part, by domestic political changes in many large democracies, including:

- Deepening economic inequality and the concentrations of economic, technological, and political power.
- The growing force of populism and populist parties in established and emerging democracies that question the need for international cooperation and risk-sharing, and have lower respect for traditional forms of policy expertise on security matters.
- Democratic backsliding, with declining respect for the rule of law in some places and strong views on the need for fewer restraints on the exercise of executive power elsewhere, both with implications for states' security relationships.
- Instability in civilian-military relations across many advanced democracies where the commitment to the norms that undergird healthy civil-military relations, such as the importance of preserving the political neutrality of the military, are being called into question.
- A steady increase in corporate and personalized power, along with the growing influence of politically engaged ultra-rich individuals, making national governments' intentions less stable and transparent over time. In the past, national leaders often believed that arms treaties and trade agreements made with another country would last beyond the administration that signed them; this is no longer necessarily the case.
- Decreasing trust in government alongside increasing distrust of information in the face of fractured media environments and rapidly improving deep-fake technology. New methods of weaponizing information erode societal cohesion and increase polarization, making effective collective action against external adversaries more challenging.
- Increasing leader inconsistency in many countries, making it more difficult to engage in long-term strategic thinking or planning.
- Accelerating political polarization, which challenges the ability to properly address large-scale societal challenges and problems, further reducing trust in government and other social and political institutions.

As with the changes to the international environment, none of these changes necessarily make increased conflict inevitable, and once again some are arguably pacifying. Taken together, however, they mean that the domestic pressures on security policy are significantly different and less predictable than they have been for much of the last 75 years.

D. Emerging Risks

Technological change is adding to the list of risks that the next generation of security scholarship must consider. Some of the most important potential challenges stem from:

- Dislocations to global economies, societies, and militaries as AI-enabled systems create new opportunities, change the productivity of labor across a wide range of industries, and introduce new kinds of decision-making risks.
- New military capabilities being developed at breakneck pace, including novel cyber weapons, hypersonic missiles, AI-enabled targeting and battle management systems, quantum computing, and increasingly autonomous low-cost precision

weapons and sensors, some of which are being used today on battlefields in Ukraine and the Persian Gulf.

- Climate change–driven migration shifting demographic and economic relationships across a wide range of fragile and conflict-affected countries, as well as an increased rate of climate disasters and the associated stresses on state and societal institutions.
- New energy technologies and the falling costs of renewables creating winners and losers among states and industries, potentially shifting the balance of power between nations and regions.
- Developments in synthetic biology that promise great opportunities for improvement in global health and well-being, while at the same time generating new risks—given the potential of bio-engineering to be used by state or non-state actors in nefarious ways in peacetime, crises, or war.

Scholars and analysts studying these risks cannot always build on the same research base that those addressing more traditional security issues lean on, including case studies they have examined from the Cold War and post-Cold War eras. Here the field may need to integrate insights from research into the adoption of general-purpose technologies in economics, the history of science, and technology studies, as well as research on environmental and ecological change, epidemiology, and biosecurity. There is more foundational interdisciplinary research needed to build the intellectual scaffolding to understand and influence how emerging technologies and capabilities will shape the international security environment.

E. Policy Relevance and the Research Funding Crisis

After the end of the Cold War, political science departments deemphasized the importance of policy-relevant research and fewer scholars in STEM fields joined interdisciplinary projects with policy

relevance as war and security dropped down the priority list for universities. History departments moved even further away from security studies with few positions in diplomatic or military history. While university research centers and public policy schools emerged as partial solutions to this shift, these organizations depend critically on external funding to support research and maintain academic talent development pipelines.

Over the last 15 years the security studies field came to rely heavily on Department of Defense (DoD) support, through the Minerva Research Initiative (MRI), and on social science research funding, including from the National Science Foundation (NSF) and other federal sources. During this period, foundation support to national security research began to shrink, roughly in proportion to federal government investments. From 2015–2020, for example, the MacArthur Foundation invested roughly \$100 million in grants to the nuclear field (a substantial portion of which supported nuclear security and arms control–related research) but then began a drawdown that ended its investment in the field in 2024. In 2025, the U.S. government withdrew more than \$30 million/year in funding when DoD ended the MRI and implemented a broader pause on funding social science research through DoD research labs. The NSF is moving to dissolve the Directorate for Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences. Though some foundations continue to fund security-related work, the dramatic funding cuts have put pressure on the entire field, limiting the potential for governments to be informed by security studies research in the future.

That gap will be keenly felt because security studies research has policy impact in at least four broad ways.

- **NEW CONCEPTS:** Researchers produce original concepts that become widely accepted within and outside the government as the framework for addressing policy choices. Examples include “threats that leave something to chance,” “strategic stability,” “the commitment trap,” “deterrence by denial,” “the responsibility to protect,”

“international regimes,” “security dilemmas,” “costly signaling,” and “commitment devices.”

- **INDIRECT INVOLVEMENT:** Researchers become involved in Track-Two diplomacy, official policy-advising board roles, classified and unclassified reports of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM), and independent and often bipartisan commissions. They publish in policy-focused journals and think tank reports that shape government decision-making. They also serve on advisory boards for companies and industry initiatives, such as the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights, which are increasingly important for managing security challenges.
- **PUBLIC OPINION INFLUENCE:** Researchers publish in popular outlets, give public talks, and contribute to television and podcast conversations to inform public opinion.
- **HUMAN CAPITAL INVESTMENT:** Researchers train future policymakers to analyze security challenges, and researchers enter government themselves.⁷ This impact does not happen overnight, however, and should be understood as a long-term human capital investment strategy through training in universities.

It is this last category of policy impact—human capital investment—that has been the hardest hit by recent cuts in government funding and philanthropy. The 91 terminated MRI grants discussed above, for example, would have supported 75–100 postdoctoral fellowships in peace and security based on 2020 data on typical MRI grant profiles.⁸ To give a nongovernmental example, the 2024 Consortium of Foundation support for nuclear weapons–related research received 128 applications for Next Generation training, none of which were funded.

The direct impact of losing so many postdoctoral fellowships at research institutions is profound. Such programs have for decades provided a vital opportunity for early-career professionals to build

knowledge, identify key policy implications of their work, engage with “operators” in government and the military, and develop networks. Most of the former government officials and heads of research institutions at the workshop stated how influential these opportunities were for their own intellectual trajectory and career success. The loss of funding imperils this pipeline, with negative knock-on effects for both research and education.⁹

Without intervention, a “lost generation” of young scholars in this domain will emerge, weakening the capacity of the United States and allied countries to produce impartial, policy-informing insights. Global transitions demand rigorous analysis, yet there are few sources of new research funds because many foundations and individual donors largely exited this space as the Department of Defense moved in, and others never returned to the space after the end of the Cold War. This is particularly concerning as the generations of scholars and practitioners who were trained and worked in academic and policy positions in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s—decades of high and warranted focus on arms control and the kind of interstate conflict risks that are now returning—are fading away.

The impacts of reduced support for research and training on the critical security problems discussed above will be profoundly negative on many fronts. These are vitally important problems; reducing violent conflict would save hundreds of thousands of lives and trillions of dollars each decade.¹⁰ Yet because they lie between traditional disciplinary boundaries, many global problems are being systematically neglected in research and education. Non-state conflict, for example, engages complex issues in economics and political science, but is not central to a subfield in either. Crisis bargaining and economic aspects of geopolitical competition similarly fall into gaps between political science and history or economics, respectively. And when one begins considering future technology-related, biologically-related, or climate-related challenges, the barriers to interdisciplinary work become even greater absent dedicated

funding mechanisms for interdisciplinary STEM and social science studies on specific topics.

The gap in investing in long-term intellectual and human capital emerged in part because funders understandably wanted to support work that offered direct solutions to current problems. And the security field has long highlighted advisory work and the impact of policy-relevant publications as a mechanism for change, whereas other strategies were seen as more indirect mechanisms.

Participants in our American Academy workshop and subsequent discussions, including prominent scholars with direct high-level government experience, noted there is another critical mechanism by which the field of security studies supports good policy. They argued that an additional and equally

crucial “theory of change” lies in the synergy between human capital formation and cutting-edge research. Experts who have careers working inside and around the relevant government bureaucracies bring concepts from early-career academic training to bear in their work crafting intelligence reports, policy options, and strategic plans. This mechanism is potentially more impactful than scholarly publications and translational writing. Support for security research thus effectively subsidizes the training of future government and military leaders in both how to think precisely about new security problems and in the most up-to-date scholarship on these topics. This is part of the powerful case for funding initiatives to support the development of a new intellectual apparatus for conceptualizing the next phase of international security risks and policy responses.

II. Recommendations for Scholars and Think Tanks

The lack of funding for security studies imperils both the development of critical national security talent and the production of directly policy-relevant research. This section outlines focus areas for research, identifies three resource requirements, suggests four practical steps the field can take, and then outlines how those translate into specific funding priorities for foundations.

A. Priorities for Scholarship

There are many other important ways besides next-generation training programs that increased funding in the field can improve global security in the coming years. The ongoing upending of international relations and rapid technological change call for renewed attention to broader issues and to pedagogical goals suited to the current unsettled

moment. Rather than focus only on the current “hot topics” such as AI, climate change, quantum, and biosecurity (all of which are important), we believe that maintaining a diverse portfolio of research topics is appropriate in a time of rapid change, precisely because of how much uncertainty this rapid change produces. Areas of particular value include:

- Historically oriented work that puts present security problems into context. Recent analytical work on past leadership transitions in the Soviet Union and China, for example, highlights why the outcome of a transition from Putin in Russia is very hard to predict. Research on the effects of crises on future cooperation between adversaries, to give another example, shows how leaders’ preexisting beliefs can matter more than the risk posed by the crisis interactions. Finally, the experience of Germany between the World Wars is a powerful

example of the relationship between democratic backsliding and violent conflict.

- Paradigms and tools that policymakers can apply to make sense of both the broader emerging context and specific policy challenges. Workshop participants discussed at length how powerful Thomas Schelling's work was in helping government officials think through Cold War-era nuclear doctrine. The same may well be true today in an age of increasingly precise weaponry as the proliferation of one-way attack weapons, unmanned sensors, next generation robotic aircraft and ships, and AI-enabled precision targeting capabilities create new deterrence challenges, as the Ukraine war and the U.S.-Israel-Iran war highlight. These conflicts also illustrate the need for more interdisciplinary research on the interactions between missile, drone, and air defense technologies and the future of strategic stability.
- Research that poses and answers the type of big-picture interdisciplinary questions that government experts and policymakers do not have time to address and often have not looked around the corner to see. For example, planning for a potential conflict in the Gulf would have benefited from work highlighting how insurance markets shape global trade. In recent conflicts, a small number of successful attacks on shipping dramatically reduced insurance availability, functionally closing the Red Sea in late 2023 and the Strait of Hormuz in early 2026, without requiring Houthi forces or Iran to exert uncontested physical control of maritime choke points.
- Research on decision-making in national and international security organizations. A great deal of work has been done on the psychology of judgment and decision-making that is relevant to understanding the choices that leaders make in national security. Applying lessons from historical successes and failures can help formulate better decision-making procedures and protocols going forward. Such work can also provide insight

into how choices are framed, how advisors and others might manipulate the options available to decision-makers, and how legal and ethical considerations can best be incorporated into decisions about war and peace.

B. What the Security Studies Field Needs

Addressing these priorities requires three key resources.

First, because today's challenges span existing disciplinary boundaries, researchers will need supportive environments for developing and incubating new or heterodox ideas. As the storied histories of institutions such as the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (where Kahneman, Thaler, and Tversky developed core concepts of behavioral economics), the Institute for Advanced Study (where von Neumann conceptualized the stored-program computer), and the Santa Fe Institute (which developed the field of complex systems science) clearly demonstrate, institutions that bring intellectually diverse groups together to pursue unconventional topics outside of normal publication pressures can allow novel concepts to flourish.

Second, scholars need opportunities for networking, synthesis, and developing interdisciplinary and international connections. Many of the issues discussed above involve topics outside the expertise of most scholars working on national security issues alone. Just as the Cold War security studies community benefited greatly by having physicists and computer scientists work with political scientists and strategic nuclear deterrence theorists on the technical limitations of missile defense, we will need research collaboration and dual-competency training in new disciplines, including AI, bioengineering, environmental science, quantum physics, and aerospace engineering. And working consistently with global scholars will bring greater insight and intuition into how their nations will respond to shifting U.S. priorities and shifting understandings

of U.S. policy processes. While often opaque to U.S. scholars, views of and trust in the U.S. government ebbed and flowed substantially over time in many countries. Building broader research communities will thus support more accurate and effective analysis.

Third, and related to the two requirements above, the security studies field needs both to meet the moment and to have the ability to build for the long term. Developing enduring research and curriculum on the topics and priorities discussed above will require making sense of a fundamentally different international environment than that in any living scholar or policymaker's professional memory. The decades-long understanding that underpinned the post-Cold War order, that the United States would invest consistently in forms of international cooperation thought to deliver shared goods and benefits (e.g., the UN, WTO, IAEA, WHO), is changing as U.S. policy reorients on multiple dimensions. Policymakers in many countries now see the United States as a disruptor, rather than an order-builder. The complex task of creating a more secure new world order out of today's widespread chaos and conflict will require years of sustained effort within the United States and with international partners.

C. How to Get There

From a practical perspective, there are several important steps the field can take if it is to "flood the zone with new scholarship," as one workshop participant advocated.

First, devote resources to improving the quality of undergraduate training on security challenges. Most people making national security policy come from military and legal backgrounds. The last chance they get to think conceptually on international security challenges is often as advanced undergraduates. After that, the majority serve in operational roles until they return to policymaking at the mid-career stage. These career trajectories create risk because most undergraduate training on international security topics

is two or three generations behind the knowledge frontier. And diplomatic/military history is rarely taught, meaning that today's students have fewer chances to build intuition or to learn from important past cases than previous generations.

Focused effort to improve security-related education should thus be a major priority. This should include:

- Creating customizable teaching materials that draw on the most recent scholarship and include sufficient instructional guidance so that widespread adoption is low-cost for faculty already overloaded with other responsibilities.
- Incentivizing courses on the threats of the moment, as was done so effectively with nuclear security issues during the Cold War, civil wars in the 1990s, and terrorism in the post-9/11 period.
- Developing innovative teaching approaches in security studies, including experiential learning that draws on capabilities of generative AI tools. The long-standing military traditions of staff rides and war gaming provide rich materials to draw on for such efforts.¹¹
- Develop new ways to bring military officers with their operational focus into training programs in major universities. Their presence supports undergraduate and graduate education by providing practical and operational insights into studying defense procurement, crises and escalation dynamics, environmental causes and consequences of conflict, and security decision-making.

Second, support both national and international study groups on particularly salient topics. These facilitate innovation through extended focus on specific issues and foster productive exchange between centers of excellence domestically and internationally. While the exact topics chosen should be responsive to scholarly and policy demand, effective study groups need to be: independent of government, so they can challenge existing policies when needed; interdisciplinary,

because discipline-specific topics are well-covered by current academic structures; and staffed with editorial, organizational, and research support, because in the current funding environment faculty time is at even more of a premium than it has been in past eras.

Third, make sure that key centers of excellence can sustain the human capital development pipeline of Ph.D. students by providing them with opportunities to build policy connections and with the bandwidth to address emerging topics as technology and international alliances shift. These institutions have historically played a vital role in mentoring early-career professionals in policy-relevant work and in providing network opportunities and exposure to policy professionals who can help them build the skills to design projects with and for the policymaking community. Critically, these institutions must be able to operate at a scale that generates robust intellectual community and draws engagement from scholars in multiple disciplines.

Fourth, invest in interdisciplinary pre- and postdoctoral fellowships. These fellows are often the “glue” that holds training, study groups, and centers of excellence together as a system because their movement between institutions builds networks and enables interdisciplinary projects and feedback loops. From a human capital perspective, time spent at new institutions is often critical for scholars working on complex topics. It provides time to develop heterodox ideas that benefit from diverse feedback and expanded networks. Hundreds of alumni of pre- and postdoctoral fellowships at leading security studies centers have gone on to senior government, think tank, and academic roles. Despite many challenges to the field, these fellowships remain in high demand, and the current supply of positions is inadequate.

D. Recommendations for Foundations and Individual Philanthropists

Philanthropy will have a critical role to play in meeting this moment. The above analysis, insights from

the meeting, and additional conversations raise six focus areas for investment. Addressing these would implicitly meet the three broad community needs identified above:

1. Curriculum and teaching innovation support so that faculty can generate the kinds of educational opportunities that would address the long-standing deficiencies in undergraduate security education.
2. Study groups that cross geographic, disciplinary, and political boundaries. In an environment of novel transnational risks, bringing researchers together to work on focused topics with modest staff support has the potential to create the kinds of analytical communities needed for the next 20 years.
3. Long-term support for core staff and programmatic activities at existing centers of excellence to ensure they can continue playing a catalytic role and operate at a scale that supports the human capital development pipeline.
4. Pre- and postdoctoral fellowships at established centers that can readily accommodate additional scholars and provide immediate access to well-developed professional networks.
5. Support to international centers that are smaller in scope and lack flexible funds to facilitate the international collaborations that are so critical to understanding future challenges. EU funding mechanisms, for example, are long-term and inflexible, making it challenging for European institutions to use them to respond to the current dynamic moment.
6. Pilot grants to creative individual scholars that temporarily free them from teaching and enable them to develop innovative projects to the point that they can win more structured funding opportunities from national science bureaucracies. While such funding remains available, its selection criteria prioritize established topics, meaning that novel work often must demonstrate proof-of-viability to be funded.

III. Conclusion: The Danger of Waiting for a New Cuban Missile Crisis or Chernobyl Moment

Many workshop participants and others consulted on this report recalled recent discussions of contemporary security problems in which experts argued that we need “a new Cuban Missile Crisis” or “a new Chernobyl accident” as a “wake-up call” for public opinion, expert consensus, and international cooperation to coalesce around the serious security problems we face. Past “close calls” to disaster were seen as necessary for the creation of international arms control, nuclear reactor safety, and security collaborations. Some argue that we need a near-disaster in lethal autonomous vehicles, attempted AGI “takeover,” regional nuclear proliferation, or bioterrorism to make change possible.

There are at least four major problems with waiting for a future crisis to motivate new investments in research and teaching on the new security environment. First, close calls are inherently dangerous and the more we learn about Cold War crises and nuclear power accidents, the more we recognize how easily they could have led to disastrous outcomes. We need to learn from past mistakes, of course, but we also need vicarious learning from war games, simulations, and even the mistakes of others. Investing now in work that identifies both potential causes of future crises and ways to mitigate their impacts can help stave off those dangerous close calls.

Second, unless we have strong intellectual leaders interpreting crises and applying reasonable lessons learned, we are likely to draw the wrong conclusions from those wake-up calls. We would argue that this has happened, for example, after the COVID-19 pandemic that killed, according to the WHO, well over 3 million individuals worldwide, but has not led to consensus about the best ways to avoid such public health disasters in the future. Instead, discussions of

the pandemic’s causes and the response tend toward one of two directions: either acrimonious debates about blame and responsibility; or “lowest common denominator” diplomatic solutions that misdiagnose the drivers of the competitive and nationalistic government policies we saw during COVID-19.¹² As a result, individual countries and international organizations have done far less than they could to stimulate productive international cooperation to prevent or mitigate the effects of future pandemics.

Third, unless we have developed better ideas ahead of time about how best to respond to crises when they occur, we will be slow to react and miss windows of opportunity. This is most obviously true for the policy community, but it applies to the research community as well. This paper is an effort to develop those ideas and provide a useful but flexible blueprint for the future of the security studies field.

Fourth, this “waiting for a crisis” view reflects a lingering fatalism. We want to underscore the gravity of the multiple security crises we are already experiencing and the urgency of the need to act now. Scholars must invest more of their time and energy to meet this moment. Universities and foundations must do the same through timely and strategic investments of their resources. Together we can create a more secure future than the one we are tumbling toward today.

Endnotes

1. This paper is the product of a set of virtual expert meetings in the fall of 2025 organized by Harold Trinkunas at Stanford and a larger exploratory meeting at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in December 2025, cochaired by Rose McDermott, Scott Sagan, and Jennifer Welsh. The authors thank participants in the virtual meetings and the Academy convening for input into the structure and content of this paper. We thank Betsy Super, Kaitlin Peach, and Mitch Poulin for organizing the Academy meeting and providing invaluable research and editorial support.
2. John Mecklin, ed., “2026 Doomsday Clock Statement,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January 27, 2026, <https://thebulletin.org/doomsday-clock/2026-statement>.
3. Demscore, Uppsala Conflict Data Program, <https://ucdp.uu.se> (accessed July 29, 2026).
4. Andrea Carboni and Ciro Murillo, “What’s Driving Conflict Today? A Review of Global Trends,” ACLED, December 11, 2025, <https://acleddata.com/report/whats-driving-conflict-today-review-global-trends>.
5. Ibid.
6. UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD), “10 Trends Shaping Global Trade in 2026,” UNCTAD, January 10, 2026, <https://unctad.org/news/10-trends-shaping-global-trade-2026>.
7. Policymaking has also benefited from the university-enhanced analytical skills of senior military leaders with Ph.D.s. Cold War and post-Cold War history would have been far more perilous without such soldier-scholars as NSC Advisor LTG Brent Scowcroft (Ph.D. Columbia), Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff ADM William J. Crowe (Ph.D. Princeton), CIA Director General David Petraeus (Ph.D. Princeton), NSA Director LTG William Odom (Ph.D. Columbia), and NSC Advisor LTG H.R. McMaster (Ph.D. UNC). This important source of national security strength will be lost if future military leaders are no longer trained at major research universities.
8. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Evaluation of the Minerva Research Initiative* (The National Academies Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.17226/25482>.
9. The importance of these fellowships for the field is clear. Stanford’s CISAC, Harvard’s Belfer Center, and Dartmouth’s Dickey Center, for example, have hosted more than 2,000 postdocs since the 1980s, many of whom later became prominent academics and high-level policymakers.
10. One 2018 estimate assessed that reducing violent conflict from 2020–2030 by half from what the 1994–2017 trends predicted would save 205,000 lives and \$6.6 trillion in response and recovery costs in 2018. Gary Milante, Hannes Mueller, and Robert Muggah, “Estimating Future Conflict Risks and Conflict Prevention Implications by 2030,” United Nations Peacekeeping, https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/estimating_future_conflict_risks_and_conflict_prevention_implications_by_2030.pdf (accessed July 29, 2026).
11. Columbia, Duke, Princeton, and Stanford have such innovative experiential learning programs in security studies, including staff rides and crisis simulations, but more such programs are needed.
12. Jennifer M. Welsh, *International Cooperation Failures in the Face of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Learning from Past Efforts to Address Common Threats* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2022), <https://www.amacad.org/publication/international-cooperation-failures-covid-19-pandemic>.

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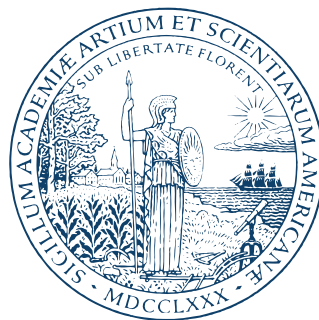
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Please direct inquiries to:

American Academy of Arts and Sciences
136 Irving Street
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138-1996
Telephone: (617) 576-5000
Email: aaas@amacad.org
Website: www.amacad.org

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