

CONVERSATIONS ON STRATEGY

PODCAST
TRANSCRIPT

Dr. C. Anthony Pfaff, Dr. Brian Carlson, Dr. Michael Lynch, Dr. John Deni, and MAJ Brennan Deveraux *2024 Annual Estimate of the Strategic Security Environment*

In this episode of Conversations on Strategy, Dr. C. Anthony Pfaff, Dr. Brian Carlson, Dr. Michael Lynch, Dr. John Deni, and analyze the 2024 Annual Estimate of the Strategic Security Environment, led by Major Brennan Deveraux. The discussion covers the narrative's impact on understanding military challenges, with regional perspectives from Carlson on the US-China rivalry, Deni on the Russia-Ukraine War's effects on NATO, and Lynch on reassessing homeland security amid diverse threats. The episode highlights the alignment of strategic research questions with military strategy and emphasizes the need for adaptability in a complex security landscape.

Keywords: *2024 Annual Estimate of the Strategic Security Environment*, China, Europe, homeland defense, strategic research questions

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We have a full house in the studio today with Dr. Tony Pfaff, interim director of SSI, the Strategic Studies Institute. Dr. Brian Carlson, SSI research professor of China security studies and Indo-Pacific policy and strategy. Dr. John Denny, SSI research professor of Joint interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational security studies. Dr. Michael Lynch, SSI research professor of North American national security studies. And Major Brennan Deveraux, Army strategist and national security researcher at SSI.

Welcome to Conversations on Strategy. The topic of discussion today is the [2024 Annual Estimate of the Strategic Security Environment](#).

Brennan, as the organizer for this year's iteration, I'll turn the conversation over to you here.

Major Brennan Deveraux

Thanks, Stephanie.

I got to lead the organization of the product this year, which really meant I got to synchronize and work with some really great subject matter experts, and it was a great opportunity. Not only did I learn a lot, but I got to see how the process works, which is unique for me, having seen some of the older products a handful of years ago that this morphed from. And, when we say the "Annual Strategic Estimate," we're talking about two different products that come together—a narrative and a list of questions that we'll get into as we go.

For the majority of this conversation, we're going to talk about that narrative, that internally created document we do at the [US Army] War College.

Dr. Pfaff, can you just tell us a little bit about the *Estimate* [and] why it's important for the student body and the researchers across the DoD?



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Dr. C. Anthony Pfaff

Sure, Brennan. First, though, I do want to say thank you for putting it together. You've done a really good job ensuring that it provides a coherent narrative that serves the functions that we want it to do. This is our third year doing it, and it replaces what used to be a very long list of strategic questions that got unwieldy.

Now, what we're trying to do with this is to provide analysis of what's going on that our senior decisionmakers need to worry about but with an emphasis more on what we don't know than we do know as a way of inspiring research here at the [US Army] War College, getting us to focus more on the kinds of decisions the Army and DoD [Department of Defense] need to make, as well as communicating to the rest of the force what the [US Army] War College is working on. Because that helps us not only improve those linkages with the force, it lets them know what they can reach out to us for, but it also helps us to create an exchange that improves our relevance.

Deveraux

I read last year's, and I'm hoping that a lot of listeners did as well, what's different this year? Why do I need to pick up an annual product? I thought the product last year was really well done.

Pfaff

If you're doing your strategic analysis correctly, things should not change that much. However, what does change are the kinds of decisions leaders need to make as the [national] security environment changes. And so, what we hope you see is something that connects what's been going on in the past, but again, with an eye towards the future and, particularly, the current challenges that the US Army and DoD [have]. But, in some cases, you may not see a lot of change. And in some cases, you will. What we hope is that you get those trends that are occurring, that are teeing up the kinds of decisions we need now, but that is anchored in the analysis from the past, which in a lot of ways doesn't change quickly or that much over time.

Deveraux

I think with that, the challenge is looking at those individual sections then, what's trending, what's important to the audience. And we have with us a couple regional experts to shed some light on what really makes the regional sections valuable for them this year.

Dr. Carlson, looking at that China section, can you talk to us a little bit about what we highlighted this year? And specifically, what really jumped out to me was the emerging relationships in the region. We highlight those relationships with our allies and partners as our center of gravity for US operations, but also with Red. I've seen a lot in the news on the changing relationships with some of our adversaries over there.

Dr. Brian Carlson

The section on the Asia-Pacific in this year's *Strategic Estimate* covers primarily the year 2023 and the first few months of 2024.

This was a period in which the US-China rivalry continued to intensify. There continued to be a close relationship between China and Russia. There was a growing recognition that there is a kind of axis among China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran involving at least loose coordination to try to revise the international order. And, there's also a close relationship now between Russia and North Korea, which adds to that challenge but also creates certain complications with China. I looked at those developments on that side. And then, on the other side, the United States continued to strengthen alliances and partnerships in the Asia-Pacific region to try to counter China.

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And so, this involved a strengthening of the US-Japan alliance, strengthening of a trilateral alliance with the United States, Japan, and South Korea, as well as closer relations among the United States, Japan, and the Philippines, and also inviting Japan to participate in the second pillar of the AUKUS [Australia, UK, United States] partnership.

So, that's the basic story of the chapter—continued challenge from adversaries, primarily from China, but also the North Korea factor getting more complicated, and efforts on the US side with its allies and partners to strengthen their relationships in response.

Deveraux

That's very political, very strategic, the point of the document. But, if I now step back and I'm a researcher here at the [US Army War] College or at SAMS or the Naval Postgraduate School, anyone, really, with a DoD focus who looks towards the Pacific, what should I care [about] and what should I pull away from on those relationships as it looks at future operations campaigning?

What does this mean to me as the potential operator framing this problem? Are these fluid relationships? Is this a dynamic environment?

Is this something that we're seeing dramatic changes in that time period?

Carlson

Well, from the standpoint of China, there's, of course, growing concern about preparations for a possible invasion or blockade of Taiwan. And, we've seen a number of statements from Xi Jinping, especially in the last couple of years, talking about the threat that he perceives from the United States. He describes a very dark strategic landscape from his perspective, and he talks about the need to struggle and to prepare to address this challenge. And, he has goals for modernizing the military and for preparing it for likely contingencies.

The CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] director, William Burns, has said that he believes that China wants to have the capability by 2027 to take Taiwan. That doesn't necessarily mean that they've made any kind of decision to do it [in] that timeframe, but that's certainly a pressing challenge. And then, of course, there are challenges in the South China Sea. China has had clashes with the Philippines involving incidents in which the Chinese Coast Guard has fired water cannons at Philippine vessels, resupplying troops on one of the disputed reefs. And so, the South China Sea is also a big potential flashpoint.

The United States has been increasingly critical of China for helping Russia with its war effort in Ukraine, particularly by providing a dual-use technology that has helped Russia to sustain its war effort. And now, there's the concern with North Korea because China hasn't gone across the line of providing weapons directly to Russia, but North Korea has stepped in and done that. It's provided missiles and artillery shells. The question is, what exactly will Russia do for North Korea in return? What kind of assistance might Russia give with North Korea's military programs or even potentially with its nuclear program? And, this could embolden North Korea in ways that might not be welcome for China. So, China might be somewhat irritated by this closer relationship that Russia has with North Korea. But in the end, Russia, China, and North Korea all have a goal of countering the United States and of trying to revise the international order. And so, all of those challenges are pressing. It is fluid, of course, but I think we should expect for quite some time that the China-Russia partnership in particular will continue to be close. And, we'll see how things evolve with North Korea.

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Deveraux

Thanks, Dr. Carlson. There's a lot of dynamics, obviously, in play there, and I think they can take some research in all sorts of ways. And, one thing that really popped out to me is the conversation about how these are not just regional problems. Russia is very involved in your assessment. And, if I could shift that focus then over to Europe. Dr. Deni, looking at the challenges in Europe, specifically, everyone is very focused on Ukraine. I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about the Europe section, specifically highlighting the political aspect of what's going on in Europe and how that's impacting what the DoD is looking at in the region.

Dr. John Deni

Yeah, Brennan, you're exactly right. Of course, the war unfolding in Ukraine now since February of 2022 is the largest conflict in Europe since World War II. The British government recently released figures with their estimate of Russians sustaining now over half a million casualties, that's deaths and injuries due to the war, among their servicemembers. And of course, it's displaced tens of thousands of Ukrainians and caused a serious rupture in what we used to think of as a relatively stable European security environment.

If we think of military operations, especially war, as an extension of politics, I think when students of the [US] Army War College and elsewhere are considering where and how to look into research topics regarding Europe, you can't help but examine some of the political activities, some of the political trends. Certainly with regard to the war itself, we know that those in Ukraine favoring a peace settlement, Ukrainian citizens have been asked this question about whether they'd be willing to trade some Ukrainian territory for peace. Ukrainians remain strongly in support of not doing that, but we've seen a weakening of those figures over the last two years. And so, that's gonna have an impact on the political calculus of President [Volodymyr] Zelensky's government in Ukraine.

At the same time, politics play a role in the thoughts and the plans of the Russians as well. We don't often think of authoritarian regimes as being beholden to politics. They're certainly not beholden to politics in the way that we are in the US, in terms of electoral politics, but there are political forces within these countries. We can think specifically of the different stakeholders in the Russian government. For example, in this case, the Kremlin itself and those immediately around Putin but then, also the defense ministry, the intelligence services, the regional authorities, even the so-called "street" plays a role in Putin's calculus, and of course, business oligarchs. So, politics unfolds in Russia, as well.

If we look to the West, it's been a recent period of major elections in Europe, and that's going to continue into 2025. This past year, 2024, we saw a new government in the UK [United Kingdom], specifically, the Labour government, ending 14 years of rule by conservatives. And so, the direction in which Keir Starmer, the new prime minister, will take the government in the UK [United Kingdom] remains to be seen. But, I can tell you, historically, the defense budget in the UK has risen—this may be somewhat ironic to some listeners—has risen under Labour governments relative to the Conservative governments they had replaced. So, we'll see if that trend continues. The UK, of course, having played a major role to date in the effort to sustain Ukrainian resistance.

Meanwhile, there were major elections across Europe for the European Parliament, resulting in a real strong showing by right-wing parties across the European continent. Upcoming in 2025, the major election I'll be keeping an eye on is that in Germany, expected in October of 2025, or in the fall of 2025. And, the very unpopular government right now of Olaf Scholz, we'll see if he's able to maintain his coalition in that.

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And of course, all these elections, they hold implications for whether and how Europeans are willing to stand by America's side, for example, the Ukraine war, but in other contexts as well. And so, I tell my students, Brennan, that one of the most important reasons, one of the most interesting reasons to study Europe, is what we political scientists call a two-level game. That is, what happens at the domestic level has implications for the international level. So, you can't understand what's happening around NATO's [North Atlantic Treaty Organization's] table without knowing what's going on within the governments of the member states.

Deveraux

Thanks, Dr. Deni.

I'm curious, as the researcher, one of the first things we do is we outline some of the assumptions we're going into planning on. As we look at this political problem, do you think that some of these underlying assumptions, not the major war with Russia, or even NATO as an organization, but some basic assumptions on basing, flyover, access, do you think that understanding the political is going to help shape those assumptions, or is Europe really the bastion of support that it's been for the last 70 years?

Deni

I think it's difficult to paint with a broad brush here. We need to look specifically at some of the key European allies. Of course, to some degree, the adage that all politics is local is certainly true in Europe, as well, and not merely at the local level, but at the member state level, the member state of NATO level. And so, I think when we look at the allies, for example, in the east, I'm thinking of the Baltic states or the government of Poland, recently, Finland and Sweden as new NATO members, [and] certainly, the UK, these countries tend to have a strong transatlanticist tradition in their foreign policy. Sweden, Finland, of course, being the newest members of NATO, showing strong transatlantic trends. But in any case, these are the governments that we typically look to as being the most steadfast by America's side.

Meanwhile, we tend to think of others, often Belgium, Greece, [and] usually France, as having more of what we might call a Europeanist or continental tradition, sometimes even being a bit skeptical toward NATO. And so, there, the degree to which American foreign policy outlooks or foreign policy preferences align with those of those countries, they often tend to blow more with the political winds.

And then, there's the vast middle ground of other countries, [which] tend to maybe swing between [the] more transatlanticist outlook and [the] more Europeanist outlook. The kinds of things I'm talking about, of course, are generally more part of the political culture of these countries, but politics plays a role. And so, I think it's incumbent upon researchers here at the [US] Army World College to understand the current political context. I think without that, you can't really understand what is happening at the strategic level.

Deveraux

Thanks. Definitely a lot to unpack there as researchers look at European problems. They're more than just European problems. And, one of the things you said, "all politics are local," I think transitions well to our next session, Dr. Lynch, looking at the most local of problems, the homeland, I have heard dozens of people scream, "The homeland is no longer a sanctuary."

Can you talk a little bit about the homeland section [and] why it's important—specifically the difference highlighted between some external challenges, internal challenges, and what this means for [a] fundamental aspect of how we conduct business in the Army, which is power projection?

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Dr. Michael Lynch

Thanks very much, Brennan.

As we've already heard, some of our external challenges are obvious. We see Russian and Chinese ships in the Arctic patrolling, exercising, and surveilling our ports and harbors, and there's always the danger of cyber disruption of our ships and planes even further out. But as you mentioned, the homeland is not a sanctuary, and some of our greatest threats, or some of the threats we probably need to pay more attention to, are actually within the homeland.

Now within this area, we have the four nations of the United States, Canada, Mexico, and the Bahamas. We, fortunately, have great relations with all three of those. But some of the same problems plague each of those nations. First of all, there's political unrest, which, as we've seen in the United States, has caused ideological divides. We have a buildup to a presidential election this fall. Mexico just finished an election process, which was one of the most deadly election cycles they've had in a long time.

That also brings up the issue of domestic terrorism. Now, you mentioned what could potentially prevent us from deploying. And certainly, domestic terrorism against our installations, ports and forts, might have something to do with that.

Another problem that we're challenged with is narco-trafficking through Mexico and [the] Bahamas. The new government of Mexico has pledged a lot more support to the police and the military for narco-trafficking. So, we'll see how that goes. As I mentioned, they've also had some political challenges in the run-up to their election. Climate change is also causing some problems. The polar regions and, particularly, the Arctic, are really relevant now because of climate change. If the polar ice cap weren't melting, we wouldn't be spending so much time on the Arctic. But now that it is, it has refocused a lot of attention there. Closer to home, we've experienced espionage. We usually think of espionage as state versus state, but we've also experienced commercial espionage and, also, academic espionage. And, cyberattacks are also always a threat, either internal or external.

Deveraux

On the challenges, specifically, to the force projection, we talk a lot about the China and the Russia threats. It's easy to look at a long history of the US being vulnerable to, say, long-range missiles or aircraft or submarines. Can you talk a little bit more about that external threat that goes beyond what some would argue [is] the extreme of a giant, large-scale operation between great powers, and more something that could be disruptive versus catastrophic, and how the homeland and people who think about the homeland are tying that into the broader DoD framework?

Lynch

The homeland, in this instance, is not limited to the continental United States, Alaska, and Hawaii. We also have a number of islands throughout the Pacific and the Caribbean that are either US possessions or close US allies that we are bound to protect. Some of those are absolutely critical. Puerto Rico and Guam, of course, are US territories, but the Marshall Islands holds one of our most important missile ranges. There are a lot of issues that we need to think about in protecting the homeland that are not just the continental United States.

Deveraux

I think it's important to note as we look at this that not only are these regions connected, as we look at the problem sets, and the *Estimate* also hits the rest of the regions, but there's broader themes that could be pulled out as well.

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And, when you go to the narrative as one of the listeners, you'll find it's not just the regions of the world. There's also the polar, there's nuclear deterrence, there's emerging technology, there's domestic problems, and looking at changes to the force. So, there's a lot of other aspects of that.

Lynch

And Brennan, if I could add, for students who are looking through the compendium for potential topics, we need people to take a harder look at homeland defense. The US military always likes to play away games, but the next game might not be away, and we need people to take a hard look at homeland defense and some of the infrastructure issues that we have that would be related to homeland defense. What's the condition of our ports, our railroads, and what's the capability of our installations to defend themselves?

Deveraux

Sir, you're 100 percent correct. And, as we look at the research and literature that's out there, I've tried to do some research on the homeland, and it's not one of those problem sets that's really deep as people are looking at it. So, researchers for that, whether they're at the [US Army] War College or somewhere else, are probably doing some pretty groundbreaking stuff just because it's fresh, it's relevant.

You're right, with the away game, it's just not the priority for a lot of people in the conversation.

There is a second part of the strategic estimate. It's the one that actually gets a lot of attention, and that's what we call the compendium or the strategic research questions. So, the second part, as Dr. Pfaff, you alluded to, is the old, a modernized version and a much more digestible version of that key strategic issues list.

This year [it] got over 100 questions from the force, most Army organizations[submitted questions], including some research questions from the Chief of Staff of the Army's office. Can you talk a little bit about the compendium, the strategic research questions, and how that kind of fits in with the broader strategic estimate?

Pfaff

This list is a lot more focused. Rather than us trying to provide supply, we're looking for demand. So, these questions come from the Chief of Staff of the Army's office. They come from major commands in the field and other organizations within the Army and DoD that provide us the things that they're worried about, and we work with them when they are providing these questions to ensure that they reach the strategic level, they're answerable, and sufficiently focused.

And, what that does for us is it provides the linkages I talked about before, but it also gives not just our own researchers, but really anyone who cares to look at the compendium, what the rest of the Army is worried about or curious about or needs some work on. We can offer a *Strategic Estimate*, we can cover a variety of topics, but there's only so many of us, and we can't cover all of the research topics that the Army and DoD want to offer. But, we put the compendium together as a way of providing that range so that others can plug into that and, hopefully, connect to those organizations so that they can provide research as well.

But for [US Army] War College purposes, particularly for those students who are looking to do IRPs [integrated research projects], really, this is a way to match you very quickly with a sponsor, which is one of the hardest things when it comes to doing your own research projects is finding someone who is interested in consuming what you've said, who you can work with to help refine your own work so that it maximizes its relevance.

So, the compendium is an absolutely great place to start when you're looking at what you want to work on.

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Deveraux

I like that word, “a great place to start.” So, these are starting points. It’s not this question equals my research question, and I’m going to submit it to my faculty adviser—and, it can, if you just stumble across that perfect question. But instead, if you know, say you’re going to US Army Pacific next, or you’re just interested in that region, you can read the narrative about the Pacific, look at some of those challenges, and then look directly to the organizations that are out there for what their staff and their command is focusing on.

US Army Pacific and Eighth Army both submitted questions this year. So, you can go right to the source, and I think that’s really valuable. We can’t cover every research problem in the *Estimate*, and we also don’t have time to cover every section of the estimate as we’re trying to just get this conversation going.

In talking with you and listening to a couple of you, it definitely sounds like some of these are enduring problems, as you said at the beginning, Dr. Pfaff, which will come up again, but it also sounds like the environment is very fluid. I know that there is literally combat happening in a couple of different regions, relationships changing, elections happening all around. The environment is going to continue to be fluid, and I hope that the authors, as well as the researchers, are paying attention to how this changes. And, I’m really curious to see how the environment’s adapting.

To people outside at the force who aren’t here at the [US Army] War College, but the organizations, this is a great tool, and I hope that when we reach back out for the external, that we are able to gather more of those questions and really are able to refine those questions to make sure that we’re able to leverage the collective knowledge of Defense Department researchers [and] academics, to tackle those wicked problems that commands are looking at.

Stephanie, if I could turn it back over to you. Thanks so much for giving me the opportunity to run the show today. It was great to be able to talk with all the researchers.

Host

Absolutely. This was a real treat.

Listeners, you can find the *2024 Annual Estimate of the Strategic Environment* at press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/970.

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