

UNCLASSIFIED

## MEMORANDUM

TO: Campaign Manager, 2028 Presidential Campaign

FROM: Zeinah Abdelsalam, Senior Policy Advisor

RE: Debate Preparation: U.S. Risk & Threat Landscape 2028 (1,520 words)

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### **I. The Bottom Line**

The United States faces a threat environment driven not by isolated shocks but by interacting systemic risks our institutions were not built to manage. Past failures share a common architecture: dismissed warnings, cognitive anchors mistaken for strategy, and jurisdictional fragmentation mistaken for specialization. These are not anomalies – they are the conditions under which multiple tipping points will converge.

These threats are not unpredictable; our institutions are structurally incentivized to underweight them until they become undeniable, at which point the cost of response dwarfs the cost of preparation. Resilience, not prediction, must anchor national security strategy. A candidate who understands this will be better prepared to lead in the decade ahead than one who promises security through vigilance alone.

The question is not whether these risks are real, but whether this candidate has the strategic depth to address them before they compound into crisis. This memo is framed without partisan assumptions; these vulnerabilities transcend administrations, and the reforms proposed here are achievable under either party's governing coalition.

### **II. Lessons from Past Surprises**

The 1950 intelligence failure in Korea, the 9/11 attacks, the 2008 Financial Crisis, and COVID-19 all reveal a common pattern: modern organizations systematically underperform when facing strategic surprises.

The Signal-to-Noise Problem and Preconceived Paradigms. Warning signals are seldom absent; they are ignored, dismissed for defying prevailing assumptions, or drowned in noise. In the lead-up to Chinese intervention in Korea, U.S. leaders dismissed clear Indian warnings as propaganda or empty claims – an example of rejecting contradictory information.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, before 9/11, reports of an “Islamic extremist learning to fly” had no effect on warning systems because it did

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<sup>1</sup> Riedel, Bruce. “Catastrophe on the Yalu: America’s Intelligence Failure in Korea.” *The Brookings Institution*, September 13, 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/catastrophe-on-the-yalu-americas-intelligence-failure-in-korea/>.

not fit traditional hijacking profiles.<sup>2</sup> Strategic warning systems are also often overwhelmed by the sheer volume of data.<sup>3</sup>

In the case of COVID-19, decades of expert warnings and simulation exercises (such as “Crimson Contagion”) existed, yet they produced only an illusion of preparedness, because resulting plans were never adequately funded or executed.<sup>4</sup>

Overconfidence and Cognitive Anchoring in Decision-Making. Judgment is often distorted by an institutional inability to imagine the unprecedented and a professional bias toward existing policy goals. Research on national security officials indicates a strong tendency toward overconfidence in their intuitive judgements and thus particularly prone to false positives.<sup>5</sup> In Korea, General MacArthur’s headquarters “doctored the intelligence” to fit military objectives, consistently underestimating Chinese troop counts to justify a march to the Yalu River.<sup>6</sup>

Failures of imagination have been costly. Bureaucracies struggle to internalize low-probability, high-impact scenarios. Before 9/11, while truck bombs were a known tactic, the use of aircraft as weapons remained a leap that aviation security experts were slow to make.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the 2008 financial crisis showed that even experts can miss systemic risks when anchored in backward-looking frameworks built for stable conditions.<sup>8</sup>

The Domestic-Foreign Void and Institutional Fragmentation. A common structural failure across these cases is the ‘void’ created by fragmented jurisdiction, which prevents a unified response to transnational threats. Before 9/11, legal and institutional barriers, referred to as the “the wall,” prevented FBI criminal agents from sharing information with intelligence agents, effectively excluding the most experienced investigators from the search for hijackers like Mihdhar.<sup>9</sup>

Systems are structurally bifurcated, too. Foreign agencies watch overseas while domestic agencies wait for local evidence. This allowed 9/11 to slip through institutional gaps, because no one was looking for a foreign threat targeting domestic infrastructure.<sup>10</sup> In COVID-19, a lack of a central node in the White House led to an incoherent response where states competed against

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<sup>2</sup> *Complete 9/11 Commission Report*. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, n.d. <https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/index.htm>. p. 347.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 345.

<sup>4</sup> Mathews Burwell, Sylvia, and Frances Fragos Townsend. *Improving Pandemic Preparedness: Lessons from COVID-19*. Independent Task Force No. 78. Council on Foreign Relations, 2020. [https://www.cfr.org/task-force-reports/improving-pandemic-preparedness/cdn/ff/ynrASUSRAIYdliFmB7caBbPu5Wr9sW4ESPO1Vzb0Tus/1726151281/public/2024-09/TFR\\_Pandemic\\_Preparedness\\_COVID.pdf](https://www.cfr.org/task-force-reports/improving-pandemic-preparedness/cdn/ff/ynrASUSRAIYdliFmB7caBbPu5Wr9sW4ESPO1Vzb0Tus/1726151281/public/2024-09/TFR_Pandemic_Preparedness_COVID.pdf). pp. 51-67.

<sup>5</sup> Friedman, Jeffrey. “The World Is More Uncertain Than You Think: Assessing and Combating Overconfidence Among 2,000 National Security Officials.” *Texas National Security Review* 8, no. 4 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1353/tns.00011>.

<sup>6</sup> Riedel, “Catastrophe on the Yalu.”

<sup>7</sup> *Complete 9/11 Commission Report*. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, pp. 344-346.

<sup>8</sup> Bernanke, Ben, Timothy Geithner, and Henry Paulson. *Firefighting: The Financial Crisis and Its Lessons*. New York: Penguin Books, 2019, ch. 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Complete 9/11 Commission Report*. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, pp. 269-272.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 263-265.

each other for medical supplies.<sup>11</sup> Transnational threats do not respect jurisdictional boundaries, but our institutions are designed as if they do.

### **III. Plausible Sources of Disruption: 2028-2033**

Across the 2028-2033 window, the most consequential risks to the United States are not discrete shocks but mutually reinforcing systemic pressures; each amplifying the others' impacts or even masking their onset (for example, cyberattacks embedded within extreme weather crises). While other risks certainly merit attention, these three stand out for their capacity to interact, accelerate, and destabilize core pillars of U.S. security simultaneously:

Accelerating Climate Tipping Points. The 2028-2033 period represents a critical threshold across multiple, simultaneous climate risk vectors, from intensifying and more frequent extreme weather events to sea level rise and irreversible ecological tipping points that are already causing unsustainable strain on our existing institutions.

Scientific modeling now suggests the tipping point for the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC) collapse is likely to be passed within the next 10 to 20 years, making the 2030s the critical threshold for inevitable shutdown.<sup>12</sup> The relative likelihood of entering this irreversible threshold is assessed at up to 25-37%, even under moderate emission scenarios.<sup>13</sup> The impact would be catastrophic and nonlinear, triggering dramatic and rapid cooling across Europe and destabilizing rainfall patterns relied upon by subsistence farmers in the Global South.<sup>14</sup>

This, alongside the increase in extreme weather events already observed, acts as a threat multiplier, interacting with existing fragility to drive mass migration and civil war.<sup>15</sup> System fragility lies in the nationalist resurgence of states, which are currently unbuilding the multilateral alliances necessary to manage a planetary 'hyperobject' like climate change.<sup>16</sup>

AI-Enabled Autonomous Cyber Threats. By 2028, artificial intelligence may approach human-level performance across a growing range of cognitive tasks, transitioning from a tool to an autonomous meta-technology.<sup>17</sup> The threat is not artificial intelligence itself, though. It is the speed at which adversaries will weaponize AI capabilities to remove human oversight from

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<sup>11</sup> Mathews Burwell and Fragos Townsend. *Improving Pandemic Preparedness*.

<sup>12</sup> Carrington, Damian. "Collapse of Critical Atlantic Current Is No Longer Low-Likelihood, Study Finds." *The Guardian*, August 28, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2025/aug/28/collapse-critical-atlantic-current-amoc-no-longer-low-likelihood-study>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Withers, Alison, and Stine Jacobsen. "Iceland Deems Possible Atlantic Current Collapse a Security Risk." *Reuters*, November 12, 2025. <https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/cop/iceland-sees-security-risk-existential-threat-atlantic-ocean-currents-possible-2025-11-12/>.

<sup>15</sup> Wallace-Wells, David. *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming*. New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2019, pp. 131-140.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 13, 21-25.

<sup>17</sup> Suleyman, Mustafa. *The Coming Wave: Technology, Power, and the 21st Century's Greatest Dilemma*. New York: Crown, 2023, p. 72.

offensive operations, allowing malware to probe, adapt, and exploit infrastructure vulnerabilities in real-time swarms.<sup>18</sup>

The likelihood of significant disruption is high, as adversaries like China have already prepositioned ‘Salt Typhoon’ access within U.S. telecommunications for use during a crisis.<sup>19</sup> If materialized, these strikes could induce widespread societal panic and disruption by disabling power, water, and even cascading into a failure of military deployment capabilities.<sup>20</sup>

Existing institutions are poorly equipped to manage this because bureaucracies tend to gear their regulatory frameworks toward past threats, while AI hyper-evolves and its threats can escalate faster than human decision cycles can respond, creating a permanent gap in defensive readiness.<sup>21</sup>

Erosion of U.S. Dollar Dominance. U.S. adversaries have identified dollar credibility as a strategic threat. With our national gross debt at \$37 trillion and interest payments now exceeding the defense budget,<sup>22</sup> China and BRICS partners are actively accelerating construction of parallel financial architectures designed to erode the dollar’s role as the indispensable anchor of American power projection.

The 2030s timeframe is critical as China seeks to “slay the dollar dragon” by liberalizing its capital account and deploying the digital RMB as an alternative reserve currency.<sup>23</sup> The impact would be an inflationary spiral, weakening the dollar’s privileged role in global finance that importantly enables U.S. defense spending.<sup>24</sup>

The system is fragile because institutional decay and increasing personalism in economic policymaking are raising risk premia, making U.S. financial platforms less attractive to global reserve managers.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Bremmer and Kupchan, *Top Risks 2025*.

<sup>19</sup> *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community*. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2025. <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2025-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Suleyman, *The Coming Wave*, ch. 13.

<sup>22</sup> Rogoff, Kenneth. “America’s Coming Crash: Will Washington’s Debt Addiction Spark the Next Global Crisis?” *Foreign Affairs*, August 19, 2025. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/americas-coming-crash-rogo>.

<sup>23</sup> Rudd, Kevin. *The Avoidable War*. Public Affairs, 2022, pp. 125-128.

<sup>24</sup> Rogoff, “America’s Coming Crash”; Currie, Jeff, and James Gutman. *The New Joule Order*. Carlyle, 2025. [https://www.carlyle.com/sites/default/files/2025-03/Carlyle\\_The\\_New\\_Joule\\_Order.pdf](https://www.carlyle.com/sites/default/files/2025-03/Carlyle_The_New_Joule_Order.pdf).

<sup>25</sup> Bremmer, Ian, and Cliff Kupchan. *Top Risks 2025*. Eurasia Group, 2026. <https://www.eurasiagroup.net/issues/Top-Risks-2026>; Farrell, Henry, and Abraham Newman. “The Weaponized World Economy: Surviving the New Age of Economic Coercion.” *Foreign Affairs*, August 19, 2025. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/weaponized-world-economy-farrell-newman>.

#### IV. Strengthening National Preparedness: Recommended Reforms

To materially improve national resilience, we must shift from prevention to ‘deterrence by denial’ – hardening our systems so they absorb and recover from inevitable shocks. Three institutional reforms address current strategic vulnerabilities:

##### **1. Designate CISA as the Mandatory Operational Lead for Critical Infrastructure.**

We must end the institutional fragmentation where preparedness is split across dozens of agencies with inconsistent mandates.<sup>26</sup> I recommend reorienting the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) as the mandatory operational lead for all 16 critical infrastructure sectors.<sup>27</sup> CISA will implement “resilience contracts” with private sector operators, providing cost-sharing incentives to ensure systems are built to persevere through AI-enabled cyber disruptions rather than just attempting to prevent them.<sup>28</sup>

**2. Statutory Expansion of FEMA’s Mission to Anticipatory Planning.** To address cognitive anchoring – the tendency to plan for the previous disaster rather than accelerating tipping points – we must reorient the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).<sup>29</sup> Its statutory mission should expand beyond reactive recovery to include “anticipatory planning,” continuity stress testing, and the integration of civil-defense functions into state preparedness frameworks.<sup>30</sup> FEMA will leverage the existing Sentinel Landscapes Partnership to synchronize civilian infrastructure hardening with military mission readiness, ensuring regional energy and water grids can withstand climate-driven shocks.<sup>31</sup>

**3. Establish a National Threat Literacy Initiative.** Institutional resilience requires societal buy-in, and societal buy-in requires that the public be equipped with the conceptual vocabulary to understand threats before they materialize. Under FEMA's expanded anticipatory planning mandate, a federally-coordinated National Threat Literacy Initiative would integrate threat awareness into K-12 and higher education curricula, covering climate tipping points, infrastructure interdependence, and cyber hygiene, and fund state-level resilience communicators tasked with translating federal threat assessments into locally actionable guidance.

Critically, it would establish public communication standards requiring that threat warnings describe tangible, local consequences rather than abstract risk levels. The cognitive anchoring that allowed COVID-19 preparedness exercises like Crimson Contagion<sup>32</sup> to be ignored was not only an institutional failure – it was a societal one. A public that cannot conceptualize what a

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<sup>26</sup> Noyes, Alexander, and Jesse Humpal. “Why the US Needs a Total Defense Strategy Based on Resilience.” *The Brookings Institution*, October 21, 2025. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-the-us-needs-a-total-defense-strategy-based-on-resilience/>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ellison, Tom, and Victoria Salinas. “Shrinking or Abolishing FEMA Is a Grave Risk to US National Security.” *Council on Strategic Risks; Center for Climate & Security*, May 1, 2025. <https://councilonstrategicrisks.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/74-Abolishing-FEMA.pdf>; Danzig, Richard. *Driving in the Dark: Ten Propositions About Prediction and National Security*. Center for a New American Security, 2011. <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/driving-in-the-dark-ten-propositions-about-prediction-and-national-security>.

<sup>30</sup> Noyes and Humpal, “Why the US Needs a Total Defense Strategy Based on Resilience.”

<sup>31</sup> Ellison and Salinas, “Shrinking or Abolishing FEMA Is a Grave Risk to US National Security.”

<sup>32</sup> Mathews Burwell and Fragos Townsend. *Improving Pandemic Preparedness*.

grid-down cyberattack or an AMOC disruption means for their water, food, and heating cannot generate the democratic pressure necessary to force institutions to prepare. Threat literacy closes that gap.

The next crisis will not look like the last one, and a president who prepares only for the past will fail the future.

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