



# Opinion: Lessons From A Korean War-Era National Security Exercise

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It is hard not to read a pretext for protectionism into the executive order President Donald Trump signed last month under the ponderous title, “Assessing and Strengthening the Manufacturing and Defense Industrial Base and Supply Chain Resiliency of the United States.”

Its chief proponent, Peter Navarro, director of the National Trade Council, explains the order’s impetus with a campaign slogan about the putative loss of “more than 60,000 factories and almost 5 million manufacturing jobs.” The order underscores conditions that “impair domestic capacity” and impose reliance on “nations that are or are likely to become unfriendly or unstable,” expressions tying it to the White House’s protectionist trade agenda.

And yet proponents have sought to wrap the initiative in more weighty ambitions, comparing it to Project Solarium, the Eisenhower administration’s 1953 review of national strategy toward the Soviet Union. Solarium is celebrated less for its impact on U.S. foreign policy or consideration of defense-industrial concerns than for its method, which involved a five-week planning exercise among only a couple dozen officials culminating in a day-long seminar with the president.



Participants were assigned to one of three teams, each charged with formulating an argument for the evolution of U.S. policy toward the Soviets—status quo-containment (Team A), confrontation (Team B) and rollback (Team C). Although the exercise resulted in only a modest policy adjustment, Project Solarium is a touchstone of strategic planning. Tyler Nottberg, former policy analyst at Gettysburg College’s Eisenhower Institute, called it “a testament to the idea that constructive competition and creative cooperation can help diverging perspectives become productive and not destructive.”

Improbable as that aspiration may sound in today’s Washington, let’s imagine a defense-industrial base assessment that lives up to the model of Project Solarium. What questions would such a project address, and around what positions would teams be assigned? In my view, such a strategic assessment would concern three questions about the industrial resources on which the Pentagon relies:

**Integration:** *Should military programs consciously draw on commercial resources or be deliberately nurtured in isolation?* Team A would advance the post-Cold-War-era position, which favors a progressively closer integration of defense and commercial resources, the view underlying, for instance, former Defense Secretary Ashton Carter’s outreach to Silicon Valley. Team B would adopt a more radical position along that trajectory, calling for the elimination of all barriers impeding the participation of commercial companies or introduction of commercial technologies to address defense needs. And from the other end of the spectrum, Team C would make the best argument for a so-called “hothouse” approach, a position arising out of an abundance of concern for security.

**Interdependence:** *Should the U.S., as a matter of policy, cultivate certain segments of the defense-industrial base that rely on no foreign sources of supply?* Again, Team A would embrace the prevailing policy of the past 20 years, which has enabled a globalized industry to emerge. Team B would double down on interdependence, along the lines of provisions in the 2017 defense authorization act that extend the boundary of the “National Technology and Industrial Base” beyond North America to encompass the UK and Australia. Team C, of course, would have to find a way to embrace and revive from its 19th-century heyday a policy of autarky.

**Capitalization:** *For what parts of the defense-industrial base is public ownership—or other forms of public underwriting of risk—the most efficient capitalization?* Team A would argue the U.S. status quo, a position complicated by the public investments made through companies to develop weapon systems and by its maintenance of a substantial government-owned industrial base of depot maintenance and munitions facilities. Team B would impose the full discipline of private capital markets on the defense-industrial sector, ending acquisition practices that involve making implicit capital investments to facilitate development programs and privatizing the depots and ammo plants. Finally, Team C would argue for a so-called arsenal system, promoting full nationalization of certain sectors of the industrial base or their organization into regulated monopolies.

Trump's executive order, however, is unlikely to instigate a Solarium-quality strategic planning exercise for the defense industry. Its scope, and perhaps intent, is too cramped, and the administration exhibits no patience or appreciation for the exploration of positions that hold no preconceived appeal. Not like Ike.

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