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Great Power Competition in 21st Century

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The post-Cold War international system is in the process of transition, with observable changes in the balance of power and in the foundations underpinning the international order. Contemporary actors, whether reigning hegemony, remaining great powers, or middle states, bring different perspectives to their strategies. To paraphrase, where powers sit is often where they stand. The United States, which exerts a dominant influence in the international system, is inherently wary of change, having much to lose and potential new powers to reckon with. China, a rapidly rising global challenger, undoubtedly sees the current period as one of opportunity, a power whose time has come. Meanwhile Russia remains an unsatisfied, legacy great power, perpetually concerned with its own weakness, while seeking to contend with various forces shaping the international environment.

Perhaps the most important discernible change in international politics is the end of the post-Cold War period. During two decades of unipolarity, which arguably still persists, the United States expanded a liberal international order, a system exported by the West in the same manner that European nations once spread the nation state system across the world. However, the decisions of great powers, that is great power politics, are still the principal shapers of the international system and order as it exists. These countries must react to changes in technology, social organization, economic or military trends, and above all each other. Such interactions spawn strategies based on comparative advantage, competitive strategies, and deliberate and emergent approaches, together with new political alignments. Although middle powers remain important, since they too are players and implicitly underwrite the international order, great power politics is back.

One of the more salient features of the recent past is the visible absence from international politics of competition among the leading states. The United States not only ruled as a superpower, but Russia was on a hiatus from influencing European politics and China was still emerging as a great power. Washington now recognizes that an inflection point has been reached, as both the U.S. National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy place considerable emphasis on great powers' competition, which are often characterized as revisionist powers. The United States faces two principal challenges: one from Russia, seeking to attain great power exceptions and a revision of the post-Cold War international order to make room for Moscow's interests. The second is from China and is far more profound, centered on actual leadership of the international order on the basis of a structural change in the balance of power. Beijing perceives a transition from unipolarity to a bipolar, or perhaps heavily lopsided multipolar system, one where it has far more influence and say relative to others. Washington, like other dominant powers throughout history, is not keen to share and perceives a threat from both challenges.

The Competition with Russia: Cold War Redux?

Although the current confrontation between Russia and the United States has often been termed a new Cold War, or Cold War 2.0, in truth this is a misleading interpretation often borne for lack of better analogies. While the Cold War may prove a familiar reference for our times, it is largely inaccurate as a description for the current competition between major powers in the international arena. The Cold War was fundamentally a competition resulting from a bipolar system, at a time when two superpowers proved the dominant forces standing at the conclusion of World War II. The two countries formed alliance blocks that partitioned security in Europe. The United States had the distinct economic advantage, but the USSR had military advantages in Europe and relative parity in the nuclear arms race in latter decades of the confrontation. Both countries had universal expansionist ideologies, making said competition inevitable not only on the basis of the distribution of power, but equally on the belief systems of the two states.

As the European theater was largely fixed throughout the Cold War, much of the conflict played out globally, thereby shaping international politics. The resultant international order was part of the U.S. grand strategy to contain and constrain the Soviet Union. That is, the conflict was not only the driving force behind world events, but also the impetus for the expansion of an international order led by Washington, which took on a politically liberal character after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today's competition is not the result of a balance of power, or a universalist ideology *per se*, but the result of conscious decisions made by leaders, the strategies they pursued, and a series of definable disagreements in international politics, i.e. it was neither destined nor inevitable. Although political rhetoric often casts geopolitical conflicts in absolutes, there is actually fairly little in the latter day conflict between Russia and the United States that stems from an inherent structural conflict, either because of power, ambition, or ideology.

Russia represents about 3.3% of global GDP, perhaps less than a tenth of America's, and in conventional military terms is broadly outstripped by the hard power and defense spending of the United States. Taken together with American allies, from NATO in Europe to numerous others in the Asia-Pacific region, the U.S. is not simply the most powerful country in the

world it also leads the strongest coalition of allies. While the stakes could still prove significant for the United States, the scale and existential nature of the conflict is not comparable to that of the Cold War. Russia is not in a position to fundamentally alter either the balance of power or the structure of the current international system. In short, the causes and character of this competition are different.

Despite overarching dissimilarities, there are some notable commonalities with past great power conflicts, the first of which is the perception of change in the balance of power underwriting the international order. The United States expanded the liberal international order, based on a series of political, economic, and military institutions, at a time when other great powers were *de facto* absent from the playing field. After a period of internal balancing, in Russia's case military modernization and reforms, they would naturally demand a revisiting of the rules and terms of this order. Classical great powers believe they are special citizens of the international system: there are rules for them, and then there are rules for everyone else.

For many years the Washington Consensus held that Russia's national security interests could be assuaged with the benefits of integration with the West, a path that Moscow did earnestly chart in the early years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Similarly, it was believed that China would rise as a 'responsible' power, which implicitly meant accepting American leadership and the existing terms of the liberal international order. Neither expectation has proven true, a fact that is now recognized in Washington, D.C. There is a distinct sense that the United States has been distracted by gambits in the Middle East, the war on terror, counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations, meanwhile the game of international politics has returned.

Past as Prologue

The Russian challenge is premised on demanding classical great power exceptions, a reapportioned sphere of influence as during the famed Yalta conference that divided the post-World War II political order in Europe, and great power arbitration akin to the Concert of Europe in 1815. Typically, the greater the power, the greater the exceptions they seek to claim from the rules and norms that are applied to others in the international system. The Russian

argument is first and foremost focused on regional interests and founded in a largely transactional interaction with the international community. In other words, this is neither about contesting leadership in the international system, nor about a Russian desire to reclaim some past superpower pedestal. On the contrary, Russian geopolitics are decidedly local, as are the proximate causes of this competition; but the contest has global ramifications.

For Russia this confrontation is about its own survival as a power in the international order, holding on to not just the Russian Federation, but its influence in the former Soviet space. Russian leaders have always sought expansion to keep what they took, now they are desperate to avert the further fragmentation of Russian influence and territory. Although the Soviet Union collapsed over 20 years ago, the aftershocks of that imperial loss are still being felt. Russian perception of vulnerability multiplied several fold after the collapse of the USSR, and the bid to retain influence over the strategic orientation of neighboring states is more founded in a desire to prevent further disintegration than in a newfound resurgence.

Moscow also never made it through a post-imperial transition, a process which typically took other powers like Britain and France several decades. In part, Russia is bedeviled by the fact that its imperial possessions are geographically contiguous, whereas other imperial powers had their colonies on distant shores. This inherently makes it difficult for Russian leaders, almost all of whom had their formative years in the USSR, to accept these countries as independent states. Likewise, it makes it challenging for the leaders of these states to trust Moscow's intentions. There are legacy issues abound that color the relationships between the states which succeeded the Soviet Union. Some have reintegrated while others are still working to divorce.

The core drivers of Russian strategy have also come into direct conflict with Washington's desire for a Europe that is 'whole, free and at peace' and with the European vision for expanding the European Union. Russia is deceptively vast, but in reality, lacks depth in Europe, where most of Russia's population and infrastructure is concentrated. As a consequence of numerous costly wars, Moscow had always sought to maintain buffer states between itself and any major power, or political-military block in Europe. The need for such an approach was even further reinforced by World War II, after which Russian leadership decided that it should never again fight a large scale industrial war on Russian soil and could not let in-between European states bandwagon with a rising opponent. In principle, this meant that Moscow would perpetually seek a say over the strategic

orientation of neighboring states, and demand buffer states to ensure its own security.

Russian strategy resulted in a natural conflict in international politics, between Russian security requirements, a Western desire to expand political and military architecture in Europe, and the interests of states like Ukraine. Some former Soviet republics wish to play both sides, while others want to be free of Russia's orbit. Such maneuvering and, political machinations inevitably create friction, misperceptions, and, as is most visible in the cases of Georgia and Ukraine, can lead to war. The Russian desire for buffer states and a sphere of influence is incompatible with the Western desire to expand NATO and the European Union further eastwards into the former Soviet republics. This conflict can only be resolved via acquiescence, compromise, or war. Russian efforts to integrate with the West, and the liberal international order, did nothing to obviate these threat perceptions and security requirements.

One of the chief problems in Russian demands is that they are premised on a long held belief that Russia is a hereditary great power, and thus deserves such privileges even though it is objectively much weaker than the United States. Historically Russia has always been a weak great power, difficult to assess with accuracy, and its current claim to a greater share of influence is simply not underwritten by economic strength or impact. That, which the West values, Russia has little of, and no allies to accentuate its influence either. Therefore, an important aspect of this competition involves Moscow trying to prove that its military power, the one measure of power most relevant to classical great power ambitions, has been underrated. Russia can not only impose its will in the former Soviet space, but can also project power successfully into adjacent regions, as during the campaign in Syria.

In this regard Moscow has made a decent case that it has been underestimated by the United States, which largely ignored Russian efforts to restore the military as a capable instrument of national power. In general, the West has a strong bias towards economic, political and demographic vitality, indicators on which Russia fares poorly, as opposed to military strength, which is perhaps an out-of-vogue but nonetheless consequential measure of power in the international system. Thus, Russia has been forced to leverage what it has, in a bid to compensate for what it does not.

Russia's desire to renegotiate the security architecture in Europe had thus been ignored for the simple reason that Moscow had no basis upon which

to make such demands. It was too weak and, as the successor state to the USSR, it had signed up to many of the arrangements in the first place. The U.S. and the West writ large fundamentally refuse to offer Moscow 'great power privileges' in this international order not just because of political ideology, but also because in their view Russian power does not merit it. Russian claims to multipolarity and polycentrism are objectively misaligned with the actual distribution of power in the international system, which was decidedly unipolar, and may now become bipolar. Hence, Russian attempts to negotiate a great power condominium have consistently failed. The United States is unwilling to entertain such notions, meanwhile European nations no longer even think in such terms, having long abandoned *realpolitik*.

That said, Russia is clearly strong enough to challenge this ruling, and is now engaged in a contest to demonstrate that it has more power than previously acknowledged or accepted in the West. That is, Russian leadership believes there should be a reconsideration of its interests, the bulk of which are regional rather than global, and a renegotiation of the security arrangements in Europe. For now, the Western assessment is that Russia is resurgent, but its power is brittle. Believing Russia to be a great power in decline, there is little impetus for the United States to renegotiate any fundamental precepts of the international order or to amend its own geopolitical ambitions. Thus, Russia has disrupted the *status quo*, but it is seen more as a great power spoiler than a true challenger.

The third element in this competition remains ideological. Although the Soviet Union with its universal ideology of communism is gone, a conflict between a democracy and an autocracy is never purely political. Without any powers to contest American influence for two decades, Washington took advantage to build and expand the international order it wanted, which in the post-Cold War period took on an increasingly political and ideological character. The Cold War is gone, but America's belief in the universal rightness of liberal hegemony has only intensified. The reason is simple: the Cold War invalidated Soviet belief in its ideology, resulting in pragmatism and cynicism, while it reinforced American belief in the universal rightness of liberal democracy. As such, political liberalism became more a theology in the West, in many respects overtaking statecraft, strategy, and international politics. While Russian leadership may presume that behind Western political slogans lies cynical pragmatism, in truth, this is a case of woefully incorrect mirror imaging. Washington is ruled by a policy consensus that is deeply ideological, believing that the United States is on the right side of history, or what Timothy Snyder artfully calls the 'politics of inevitability'.

Thus, today the West is sufficiently ideological, and this ideology is incredibly intolerant of refusenik autocracies, or anocracies, such as Russia. The problem is less that the Russian political system is illiberal, but that it is anti-liberal. It exemplifies Carl Schmidt's critique of liberalism, seeking sovereignty in decision making and exceptionalism for itself both in domestic and international politics. As such, the ideological component of this conflict is still little understood, but Russia does have a political ideology, and it is one the West finds intolerable. There is an implicit association in the West between the decline of liberalism in Europe and the competition with Russia, blaming the latter for the former. At the center of these concerns about the rollback of democracy lie two modern tenets of liberal political ideology: the expectation of a sustained liberal hegemony and democratic peace theory.

Hence, although Moscow may assume that the United States has no vital interests at stake in the conflict over Ukraine or Syria, this is a misreading of the competition. The contest fundamentally challenges certain assumptions in Western political ideology and raises uncomfortable questions about the future of the international order. While Moscow is concerned about its ability to retain and defend what is left of the Russian empire, possessing a strong desire for recognition as a great power that deserves a seat at the table in the international system, the challenge for the United States is also far more strategic than the proximate causes of this conflict would presuppose. The central question this competition raises is whether the United States can retain leadership of the international order after the loss of primacy, and if the character of this system would remain intact once it is no longer underwritten by unipolarity.

This is not to say that Russia will somehow emerge as a prominent pole in the international system, or that America is at all entering a decline, but the current international order was underwritten by the preponderance of American power and the absence of competition with other powers. That period of history has clearly come to an end. Great power competition can prove incredibly destructive to the international order if the powers value their interests, and they typically do, over the structures of the system. Such machinations destroyed the Concert of Europe, and the post-World War I international orders. At the very least, it is apparent that neither Russia nor China underwrite or support, the liberal nature of the international order, or the political ideology with which Washington sought to imbue this system. As such, liberalism in the international system faces strong headwinds, and a reversal of gains made by democracy seems almost inevitable.

The Challenge from China

Although still quite behind the United States in defense spending, China has already surpassed America's GDP when adjusted for purchasing power parity. That is, of course, only one measure, but it seems clear that in terms of most macroeconomic indicators China will rival and likely surpass the United States in the coming decades. Beijing has leveraged economic strength into a foreign policy seeking to secure the resources it needs for economic growth, investing in resource extraction around the world, infrastructure to bring materials to China, and development of other countries. Alongside these numerous projects in Africa, South America, Central Asia and Southeast Asia, China has also demonstrated that it views the world through a decidedly geoeconomic and geostrategic lens. At first cautious, but optimistic, the United States no longer sees China's rise in positive terms and has increasingly taken a zero-sum perspective on Chinese influence in the international system.

The reason for American apprehension is straightforward; China appears less another successful nation state, rising to participate in the current international order, and more a global challenger for leadership. The announcement of the One Belt One Road policy is seen as further evidence of Chinese geopolitical ambitions, together with a desire to make its currency an international competitor to the U.S. dollar. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank is another example of a host of economic and political structures that China is building, which while tentatively are part of the international order, decidedly are not led or initiated by the United States. As such, China's policies diffuse the dominance of institutions created by the West, deplete certain processes such as development on the basis of political or ideological conditions, and steadily position Beijing for a greater voice in the international system.

These policies are concomitant with a tangible shift in the relative economic balance and vitality between Europe and Asia, with the latter steadily rising to overtake the former. In truth, the economic and demographic strength of American allies in Europe has long been losing ground to that of its regional partners in the Asia-Pacific region. These disparities are further magnified by the considerable differences in defense spending and the percentage of GDP converted from economic

strength into military strength by allies, with European nations spending much less as a global share of defense spending than they once did. If there is such a thing as a locus in international politics, where economic and political activity is the most vibrant or increasing, it is steadily shifting towards Asia.

The economic foundations of growing Chinese power are evident, as the inevitable change in the balance of power in the international system, but Beijing's military spending is perhaps the more salient issue. Matters would be different if China sought to be an economically strong, but militarily weak coalition building power like Germany. This is decidedly not the case. Instead, China has demonstrated that it has classical great power ambitions, first seeking to maximize its own security relative to neighbors, and undoubtedly at the expense of others, and then hoping to parlay this into regional hegemony. China has been rapidly translating economic strength into military power. Part and parcel of this effort has been Chinese military reform and modernization, reducing the size and role of the army and placing greater emphasis on services more relevant to power projection. A military competition is heating up as China has dramatically altered the regional military balance in the past decade.

At the heart of this competition is the security dilemma created by internal balancing, i.e. the military modernization and expansion of one power, particularly in a region that is already characterized by a network of alliances. This outcome is not inevitable, but Chinese leadership has proven particularly oafish and shortsighted in how to manage their own rise and signal their intentions to others. China appears bent on recreating many of the strategic errors of Wilhelmine Germany in advance of World War I. The first of which was threatening regional neighbors in a mistaken belief that this would force them to hedge and bandwagon with the rising power. The second was the construction of a large navy at the urging of Alfred von Tirpitz, which inevitably made Germany an existential threat to Britain, the ruling maritime power of that age. Moscow is also no strategic visionary in this respect, threatening much of its near abroad and Europe, in a case of misreading the prevailing tendencies in the international system.

China's 'nine-dash line' policy in the South China Sea signals irredentism and revisionist ambitions to neighbors, which consequently casts China's growing power as a threat. Here it is important to recall that countries generally do not balance power, they balance threats, and hence national

perceptions of another country's intentions are essential. Given the not long forgotten history of World War II, resentments and threat perceptions not only linger, but can be quickly resurrected among neighbors. For the same reason that the United States did not treat Russia as a threat in 2013, but rapidly and dramatically changed its assessment after the Russian conflict with Ukraine in 2014, China's military modernization is also now cast as a principal threat to American dominance and the security of regional allies.

By choosing to invest economic power into a large navy designed for power projection, including the construction of amphibious assault ships, carriers, and the like, China has made a profound strategic choice. The same decision colored Germany's future roughly one hundred years ago, when it chose to take on the maritime superpower of its day. The natural British response was a series of balancing ententes, further encouraged by German neighbors who were frightened by its military power and concerned over its bellicose behavior. Japan also read too much into Alfred Thayer Mahan's theories on the role of naval power, building capital ships and a large navy that ultimately led to a conflict with the United States. It seems the lessons of Japan's Greater Co-Prosperity Sphere have been somewhat forgotten in the Asia-Pacific region.

Thus, China has already made some of the more consequential mistakes typically found among rising powers destined for overextension, often resulting in self-encirclement. In this case, Beijing has inaugurated a military, political and economic competition for dominance with the United States that will prove to be a central organizing cause for the Washington policy establishment in the years to come. Japan walked some of these very footsteps in the late 1930s. This competition is now codified in fairly explicit language in American national security documents, but a harder line most recently expressed by the imposition of tariffs against Chinese goods is not inevitable. The contest for military superiority in the Asia-Pacific region will now be joined by a more overt conflict in the economic domain. In some respects, this competition may prove a more serious contest for the United States than that posed by the Soviet Union, which was always the far weaker economic power during that contest. While lacking in attractive ideology, China has all the potential to match American economic might and sustain a prolonged contest across multiple regions.

China's decision to invest in basing infrastructure closer to Europe and military signaling via joint exercises with Russia, communicates to others that it is intent on global power projection. China wants its ships to be seen

in Europe, the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. That also will be taken as an explicit threat by Washington to America's long standing maritime dominance and provision of security to the global commons. Despite China's public diplomacy, seeking to portray its own ambitions as benign, or mutually beneficial, it is unclear if middle powers take a positive interpretation of China's rise. On the one hand, most countries naturally seek an alternative actor to the United States, if only to hedge, play two-level political games, and have room to negotiate. On the other hand, Washington has proven remarkably successful at being accepted as a benign international hegemon, thus prolonging the period of unipolarity, and preventing the emergence of any balancing alliances. China will find itself hard pressed to reproduce such a success, especially given its relatively inauspicious start.

Unlike Europe, where NATO members truly have no alternatives to that alliance framework, the Asia-Pacific region is much more competitive and less stable when it comes to alliance politics. For one, they are premised on a hub and spoke system, where nations are allied to the United States but not necessarily with each other. They also have options to hedge, and, if China becomes strong enough militarily, and a more lucrative partner economically, they may reconsider their strategies. While there is no competition over allies between Russia and the United States, implicit in China's rise is a potential reworking of alliance politics in the region. Europe also has no independent middle powers, though admittedly that depends on how one classifies the role of Turkey, but suffice it to say there is another layer to the competition with China in the role India chooses to play.

The politics and strategy of independent middle states can shift depending on choices made by great powers. Indeed, it is just as possible that one day India will become a great power itself and will have to choose between China and the United States in terms of alignment. Middle states will prove to be one of the objects of great power competition in the 21st century, as the United States and China vie for leadership. In recent decades, they have had no choice. There was American leadership in an expanding liberal international order, and... American leadership. The extent to which great powers are able to sell themselves as non-threatening to the security of others and articulate a pragmatic vision for their role in the international system will substantially reduce friction and the emergence of new balancing coalitions. So far, they have done rather poorly, offering considerable comparative advantage to the United States, which, while being the strongest conventional military power in the world, is also often perceived as less threatening.

Strategies of Comparative Advantage: the Case of Russia

Russia's comparative advantage is its historic resilience and staying power in the international system. The long-term trend indicators on Russia are rather mixed. Despite a strong dependency on resource extraction, Russia continues to muddle through, and even with an anemic growth averaging 1.5 percent of GDP (arguably stagnation), Russia can still sustain a prolonged competition. At this rate of spending Russia can maintain defense spending of 2.8 percent of GDP for at least a decade to come and there are already indicators that planned cuts in military expenditure are not seriously being implemented, only reductions in wanton procurement.

Demographics also reflect complex truths. While hundreds of thousands leave the workforce every year, shrinking working age manpower, there is considerable growth in the availability of military age men over the coming years. Russia's demographic constraints will become more problematic in the early 2030s, which means there is at least another decade of competition, or confrontation, that Moscow can readily sustain. Russia is also the labor market for the former Soviet Union, benefitting from millions of foreign workers and a large external labor pool, making it the third or fourth highest country for migrant workers annually. Therefore, Russia has policy options to manage its own demographic decline, although these are not without attendant considerations for social stability, national identity, etc.

Defense industrial production, despite suffering years of delays after a messy divorce with Ukraine's defense sector, a process of separation that is still incomplete, has continued to recover and become independent. Russia is equally keen on severing dependence on Belarus. Science and technology in military industrial production continues to be one of Russia's strengths, despite the acknowledged 'brain drain' and decades of divestment prior to the state armament program of 2011–2020. Russia still has the know-how and industrial processes to produce advanced weapons, and the inertia of military reforms, together with a sizeable procurement program, will carry its armed forces into the 2020s. The future beyond this decade remains murky, as it is unclear if Russia has the economic resources to develop, test, and deploy the next generation of capabilities and operational processes required to keep pace with emerging technologies in modern warfare. That said, at least over the past year, hydrocarbon prices have steadily inched up, allowing Russia to reinvest in

its reserves and sustain defense spending. The Russian budget was based on an average of \$40 per barrel of oil instead it has been closer to \$55.

Russia has invested in the foundations of military power it needs for direct competition, i.e. conventional and nuclear capabilities, but also has become quite effective in indirect competition that involves non-military or non-kinetic. Indeed, it is increasingly evident that while a great deal of attention is being paid to the conventional military balance in Europe and Russia's substantial non-strategic nuclear arsenal, which represents a first offset type strategy, it is the indirect battlefield that will prove more salient.

Here indirect competition should be interpreted as forms of political, economic, and informational warfare, as enabled by modern means in global domains. These domains include the man-made realm of cyberwarfare, together with space, or undersea global environments, upon which modern telecommunications depend. The international system of finance, global trade, banking, and arbitration are all mediums for competition and confrontation, as is lawfare, one of the few forms of indirect warfare where the West holds distinct advantages. Russia has leveraged advantages in political and informational warfare, including unconventional or irregular approaches to conflict. However, it has consistently appeared clumsy or ill-considered in its understanding of lawfare and the potential long-term costs economic warfare could impose, both of which strongly favor the United States.

The direct and indirect forms of competition are distinct, but not separate. To part them is to create a false dichotomy. It is Russia's restoration of military power that has allowed it to engage in coercive diplomacy, leveraging less costly instruments, such as political warfare or unconventional warfare to make gains in the international system. One is a principal resource for the other, both deterring robust responses from adversaries, posing substantial risks of escalation, and at the same time proving to be a useful instrument for compelling adversaries. Across the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria, Russia has demonstrated that conventional military power and nuclear weapons have an important role to play in shaping adversary decision-making all the while leveraging other instruments to achieve political ends. Therefore, modern competition is less about direct spending, or a straight matchup in military might, and more about the effective integration of military and non-military means in pursuit of political ends. As modern-day conflicts prove, it is easy to mispend hard military and economic power in pursuit of geopolitical gambits that result in quagmires, where each further expenditure only yields diminishing returns.

Thus, the Russian strategy is akin to economic and political raiding, seeking to coerce the United States into the great power condominium that Moscow has so far been unable to attain. The vision being that if Russia remains a strategic thorn in America's side long enough, as the partisan or insurgent in the international system, then the more significant challenge from China will convince Washington to make a deal. In some respects, Russia is trading roles with China from the earlier decades of the Cold War, the 1960s and 1970s.

To better affect this strategy, Russia has invested in non-contact conventional warfare and escalation dominance with non-strategic nuclear weapons, believing that a combination of the two will give it the requisite options to deter the United States. The matter remains in question in areas where the asymmetry of interests is relatively narrow, such as Syria, and Russia's position remains relatively exposed to brinksmanship.

Another element of Russian strategy is to seek an entente with China. Despite political and economic overtures, and growing military cooperation, the reality is that alliances are principally made in response to threats. As such, only the United States can engender such an alliance, by posing a threat to both countries in their respective regions and *vis-à-vis* their security considerations. Great powers are inherently distrustful and have a logical aversion to entering into alliances which are explicitly impositions on sovereignty, that carry considerable liabilities. As such, the leading alliance maker between Russia and China is the United States and its foreign policy, considering that the relative competition between these powers and Washington is far more prominent than interpersonal squabbles.

Washington Doubles Down

The United States naturally struggles with strategy formation. The policy establishment is enormous, composed of numerous cottage industries, diffused interests, and a plurality of voices involved in policy making. At times, it may seem that no one is in charge, or everyone is in charge, but rarely does Washington come across as though someone is in effect implementing a deliberate strategy. That said, historically, democracies have been successful at avoiding overextension by correcting course in foreign policy. The diffuse interests make it difficult for cartels, or factions in foreign policy, to ally together in pursuit of a self-destructive course. While the United States remains ideologically

committed to its overall vision for the international system, there is a strong recognition that great power competition, interstate warfare, deterrence and compellence are back at the center of strategic considerations. The Middle East remains a powerful distraction and a strategic nuisance from which Washington can never quite disengage.

America's approach is centered first and foremost on reestablishing superiority in warfighting domains, to the extent possible, maintaining favorable regional balances of power against its principal challengers, and reinforcing a robust alliance network. Indeed, the United States has all the advantages, but it also has a vast geopolitical terrain to defend. So far, the Washington establishment has proven unwilling to define interests, trade, and determine what they will defend versus surrender. Hence Frederik the Great long ago defined one of the chief strategic problems faced by the United States, 'he who defends everything defends nothing.' The United States remains committed to defending all that it had built during the period of opportunity created by decades of unipolarity.

The United States retains tremendous advantages in economic, military, and diplomatic resources. Its defense budget, at over \$600 billion, outstrips all rivals and allies combined. Research and development continues to be a strength, as does the ability to command the commons. America is a global superpower, with a robust infrastructure network that allows it to project conventional military power in most places on the planet and oversee much of the international trade that takes place in the maritime domain. A vast alliance network provides the logistics, geography, and defense-technical cooperation America needs to maintain superiority, if not primacy. The initial response has been to double down on military superiority and outcompete China, assuming that many of the capabilities acquired will be just as suitable for handling a hypothetical conflict with Russia. A dearth of nuclear options, imposed via self-disarmament, will be rectified as already declared in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review. Meanwhile the global force posture will focus on agility and resilience.

America has also reconfigured itself from a net energy importer and dependent to a net energy exporter. Thanks to shale extraction, the United States has become an energy power, one that will be able to shape energy markets in the future. American energy extraction can become a serious problem for energy dependent economies, like Russia, as the United States will be able to offer alternatives to otherwise dependent customers. Washington may also encourage a general suppression of the energy market, thus starving adversaries like Iran and Russia of resources. The rise of American shale energy

production has also given the country a freer hand in Middle Eastern politics, able to interact with allies there by choice, rather than from a concern about the security of energy supplies.

Thus, the path embarked upon represents mostly building up capacity for direct competition with conventional and nuclear weapons, seeking new technologies, and potential offsets. Washington will seek to build up resilience against the indirect toolkit possessed by Russia and China, while working to impose costs by leveraging its leadership position in the international system. America has a preponderance of power in economic warfare and lawfare over Russia, though much less so when it comes to China. The competition with China will rely heavily on regional allies, such as Japan and South Korea, to help offset growing Chinese military power. Instead of making trades on interests or compromising, the United States will work hard to align new partners such as India. The drawback of America's strategy of direct competition is that it may spend itself to death when considering the economic challenge posed by China and Russia, together with international 'rogues' like Iran and North Korea. The competition is between these countries and Washington, not so much among them.

Indeed, Washington recognizes that the medium powers are one of the keys to maintaining leadership in the international system, and it is effective at leveraging the strategic missteps of adversaries like Russia or China. American soft power and the attractiveness of its ideology also offers considerable advantages over that of Russia and China. Frankly, neither are considered to be attractive models of political or social development abroad, nor are their progenitors particularly interested in exporting them. Russia's and China's problem is that they are overly cynical and transactional in the international system, which is a handicap relative to the West. American soft power greases the wheels for coalition building, unilateral use of force, and generally supports the pursuit of interests abroad with less friction. Russia and China seem to like running uphill.

China: the Geopolitical Bulldozer

Beijing's vision is a steady expansion of influence to establish itself as a regional hegemon and a global power with an equal say in the international system on the basis of hard determinants of power. China is heavily advantaged by the geography of its region and modern military technology, where the

United States is playing the role of onshore balancer. American forces, based in Japan, are already under considerable strain to maintain the regional balance of power. China has leveraged modern geoengineering in a creative bid of revisionism, building islands to annex a sea and create a maritime buffer space between itself and American military forces.

The first element of Chinese strategy is pushing survivable American naval power out beyond the first island chain. Focusing on conventional military power, pumping out frigates and destroyers like sausages, China is playing a relatively straightforward numbers game. More is more in this case, and when it comes to the military balance, China will have more ships and more offensive fires than the United States. China's military strategy takes to heart the adage that quantity has a quality of its own. Yet China's military strength has a fundamental problem, and it is not dissimilar from the challenge faced by Japan. China's economy, an assembly line exporting goods to the rest of the world, while importing resources and taking in foreign direct investment, is heavily dependent on sea lines of communication. The U.S. Navy commands the maritime domain, and, while regional waters may be heavily contested, China has to gain access to resources secure from American military or political interdiction. Hence, Beijing's investment in Russian energy resources in the Yamal peninsula and a desire for land-based infrastructure across Asia that obviates America's basing network.

There is an inevitability to China's rise; eventually the nation can rival America's research and development in military technology together with output in naval shipbuilding. However, it will have to balance being a challenger without actually mounting a challenge, an unsustainable strategy. The United States is already unwilling to accept Chinese maritime claims, or its imposition of an air identification zone. Small confrontations, freedom of navigation operations, and other military activities may eventually translate into a crisis. However, the most probable reality is that a political crisis will emerge with one of China's regional neighbors, one unexpected by both powers, but with strategic implications. It is more through such crises, than through calculated gambits, that gains and losses are realized in international politics.

China's other advantage is that while it may be viewed as a potential threat by neighbors, it is not considered a power capable of global power projection. As such, Chinese military and economic power is not viewed as a threat by most of the other denizens of the international system, and Beijing has sought to characterize its ambitions as a co-prosperity project more so than a geopolitical one. China has also sought to secure its interior flanks by forming a growing partnership with Russia, even if it is founded on a series of

transactions. The market offered by Beijing is lucrative. China is a consumption engine, one that other countries, including most of America's allies cannot ignore. Thus, China leverages their desire for trade to gain access to technologies and enthrall said countries in a host of Beijing-initiated institutions. The end result will likely be parallel economic, finance, and legal institutions that not only diffuse Western influence, but also disarm it of its normative power, i.e. a host of alternative processes that coexist to compete within the current international order. Indeed, Beijing's economic strategy is far more astute and promising than its military vision.

Competitive Strategies

The object of competitive strategies is for one power to force their adversary into spending resources in a particular area of competition. In theory, this aspect of the competition is a feint, or one where one side has cheap offsets. For example, the United States enjoys considerable advantages in the undersea domain over China and could likely sustain a competition there much more cheaply than its counterpart. Similarly, Russia has long invested in nuclear energy and weapons research, giving it considerable advantages in developing and deploying new nuclear weapons, together with innovative nuclear designs. As powers seek to expand the competition, it is only logical that they will seek out strategies that prove exorbitantly expensive for their adversaries.

America's main advantage over Russia is the latter's unsecured vastness and lack of infrastructure. Leveraging its global force, the United States can push Russia into greater spending to create military infrastructure in remote regions like the Arctic or the Far East, thus taking away resources from the main theater in Europe. Russia's decision to develop an entirely new line of strategic weapons to mitigate American missile defenses represents an inadvertent success in competitive strategy. Albeit unintended, the amount of money spent by Russia to deal with missile defense is likely remarkable given the actual lack of capability that missile defenses offer. It is unrealistic to expect that the United States will ever field a system capable of shielding it from unacceptable damage in a nuclear exchange, and it is nowhere near such capability today. Thus, Russia's fortress mentality and paranoia can often fuel a conventional weapons arms race, even in cases where Moscow enjoys considerable advantage in offense-dominated domains such as strategic nuclear weapons.

Russia's competitive advantage is undoubtedly in the domain of indirect warfare. The amount of attention Washington pays to Russian political warfare and information operations is enormous relative to the actual efficacy of these efforts. The competition in the Balkans is, perhaps, the best example of this farce, where it is unclear what it is Russia has achieved, if anything, and whether there is anything worth contesting in that region. However, Washington seems determined to fight Russian indirect warfare, which one can only suspect features a large gap between activity and achievement. That said, political warfare seems to be working for Russia, even though it comes with considerable Western retaliation in the form of economic and diplomatic punishment. Flank theaters, such as the Middle East, also afford lucrative options to become a power broker on the cheap and undermine American foreign policy. This region holds opportunities for Moscow to force a dialogue with Washington as equals and pressure America's position by being an alternative actor.

The competition between China and the United States is more nuanced. China may focus on missile counts to make forward presence for the United States untenable, while Washington may leverage its considerable advantages as a technologically superior aerospace power to return the pressure. The outlines of this arms race are still somewhat unclear, but thus far it seems China has taken the bait in an effort to develop its own 5th generation aircraft, an area of competition where the United States leads by decades. With the deployment of its SSBNs, China may also be embarking on a fairly unrealistic strategy of a sea-based nuclear deterrent, based on the bastion approach taken by the Soviet Union. Given American superiority in the undersea domain and unfavorable geography, China's spending on a nuclear triad does not appear to be a particularly competitive approach.

Meanwhile China has a straight path to make the United States spend itself into oblivion. First, establish a small but prominent network of global bases to tie up American forces with operations. Then leverage advantages in purchasing power parity to produce a large conventional maritime force, heavily vested in offensive firepower. By focusing on offense-dominant domains or forms of warfare, China can take advantage of America's inherent problem in trying to make credible extended security guarantees to regional allies. Washington's national security establishment tends to be prone to rather expensive technological solutions and gross military spending. America will pressure its allies to increase their defense spending, shifting the burden to those who have central deterrence, but at the same time reducing the benefits they derive from the alliance. One possible outcome is hedging behavior among American allies in the region as they come to question whether Washington can truly make good on its security commitments given the actual military balance of power.

Conclusion

Since the end of the Cold War, the international system has been shaped less by great power politics and more by the politics of one great power. This era has come to a mutually understood end, but the world is embarking on a period of uncertainty. Throughout there are signs that great and regional powers lack decisive influence, their economic or military strength counting for little. American campaigns in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, together with Russia's campaign in Ukraine reflect that pressure does not necessarily translate into leverage. Translating hard power into desired political ends is increasingly difficult. It is unclear what truly counts and how to best make use of it. The actual dynamics of power are uncertain. Thus, the international system is not only embarking on a period of great power competition, but also great power experimentation, not dissimilar from the interwar period of the 1920s and 1930s.

Although posited as a competition between Russia and China, this period is only defined so because of the continued preponderance of American power in the international system and Washington's public reticence to compromise. War between the great powers not only remains improbable, it is near impossible given the persistent oppression of nuclear deterrence. Indeed, it is unfathomable. However, the absence of war between the chief players will undoubtedly be substituted by numerous other conflicts as a product of the unfolding competition. Political warfare, subversion, cyberwarfare, and the endless battle for the narrative in the information domain will prove more salient forms of conflict together with destructive proxy wars and insurgencies. Direct competition will militarize and pressurize regional environments, raising tension and the attendant risks of military adventurism. The absence of rules makes risk mitigation difficult. Thus, rules will be made by crisis, as they were during the early decades of the Cold War, and agreements made as a result of overindulgence in direct competition.

The powers in question cannot destroy the international order and replace it with a new system. New orders have historically resulted only from great power wars. Indeed, Russia has no such ambitions, only seeking exceptions and to secure its own regional interests, along with political recognition as a great power. China, on the other hand, wants a greater say and eventually leadership in the international system, while building its own parallel institutions. The changing balance of power between China and the United States, together with Russia's strategy of geopolitical insurgency, both point to a progressive erosion of the current international order. As the competition expands, crisis stability will deteriorate and rules inherited from the Cold War are likely to be abandoned. Thus, the nature of the order is destined to change profoundly in the coming years, both due to the new balance of power, and as a collective byproduct of self-interested decisions made by the leading powers in the international system.



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