The United States in a World of Great Power Competition

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ABSTRACT

The adoption of the 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) marked Washington's official pivot to "great power competition" as the conceptual framework for U.S. foreign policy. The shift to great power competition as the foundation for U.S. foreign policy represents an acknowledgment that the "forever wars" in the Middle East had become an expensive, strategically dubious distraction from the more pressing challenge posed by a revanchist Russia and a rising China. The template for much of the "new" thinking about great power competition is the Cold War – the last time the U.S. faced a peer competitor – whose shadow hangs over much thinking about U.S. policy toward Beijing and Moscow. In many ways, though, the Cold War was an outlier in the history of U.S. foreign policy, a product of very specific circumstances that are unlikely to be replicated in the 21st century. A danger exists in seeing the Cold War as a typical example of great power competition, or in using it as a template for U.S. foreign policy in the 21st century. Great power competition is usually a chronic condition, which is to say, more or less incurable. In order for a country like the United States to enter a new era of great power competition with China and Russia, it will need to convince the American public that the stakes are high and the dangers are great enough to justify the costs. Without the ideological or existential stakes of the Cold War, public support for an assertive strategy of containing Chinese and Russian influence will likely be hard to maintain. Rather, the U.S. is likely to continue the reversion toward its pre-Cold War pattern of seeking to insulate itself from the dangers of the world, and increasingly pass the burden of resisting the expansion of Chinese and Russian influence to others.

KEYWORDS

Great power competition, U.S. foreign policy, Cold War, Russia, China

The adoption of the 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) marked Washington's official pivot to "great power competition" as the conceptual framework for U.S. foreign policy. Designed to signal an end to the nearly two decades of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency – and with them, the greater Middle East – dominating U.S. strategic thought, the NSS singled out Russia and China as rivals that "challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity."[1] It was also a template for the grand strategy (to the extent that such a thing exists) of the United States for the foreseeable future, albeit one deeply indebted to the past. The template for much of the "new" thinking about great power competition is the Cold War – the last time the U.S. faced a peer competitor – whose shadow hangs over much thinking about U.S. policy toward Beijing and Moscow.[2]

In many ways, invoking the Cold War as a template makes sense. Most of the existing U.S. national security bureaucracy was built for that kind of competition. Moreover, unlike the "forever wars," the Cold War appears to offer a satisfying narrative arc, with its largely bloodless (for the United States at least) triumph over the Soviet "evil empire" vindicating in retrospect not only the strategy of containment, but also many of the less savory activities – like coups and electoral interference – that the U.S. undertook in its name. President Donald Trump's lament that "We never win, and we don't fight to win," captured a widely held frustration about the ambiguity of recent conflicts.[3] Pivoting back to something like Cold War-style great power competition therefore allows the U.S. to return to familiar ground, and has for that reason been embraced by much of the national security establishment in a way that counterinsurgency and counterterrorism never was.

In many ways, though, the Cold War was an outlier in the history of U.S. foreign policy, a product of very specific circumstances that are unlikely to be replicated in the 21st century. The period form 1941, when Franklin Roosevelt led the U.S. into World War II, through the end of the Cold War circa 1989 was thus an exceptional period in U.S. history – even if its exceptional nature is often overlooked in Washington today. Roosevelt and his successors from both parties embraced the necessity of U.S. global leadership as necessary to beating back the threat of first Nazism and then Communism. Those four and a half decades produced a vast national security state and something like a consensus among the American public on the importance of global engagement. The shift was to a large degree a product of the stakes involved. The nuclear-armed Soviet Union came to be seen as an expansionary, revolutionary power that threatened the very existence of the United States. The idea of the United States as the head of a besieged "free world" underpinned support for policies and institutions that were out of keeping with much of the country's previous history.

1 "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," The White House, December 2017, accessed November 19, 2020, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf.

2 Robert D. Kaplan, "A New Cold War Has Begun," Foreign Policy, January 2019, accessed November 19, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/07/a-new-cold-war-has-begun/; Niall Ferguson, "The New Cold War? It's With China, and It Has Already Begun," New York Times, December 2019, accessed November 19, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/02/opinion/china-cold-war.html; Katrina Vanden Heuvel, "From the Hope of 1989 to a New Cold War," Washington Post, November 2019, accessed November 19, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/11/12/hope-new-cold-war/; Evan Osnos, David Remnick, and Joshua Yaffa, "Trump, Putin, and the New Cold War," the New Yorker, February 2017, accessed November 19, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/06/trump-putin-and-the-new-cold-war.

3 Donald Trump, "Remarks by President Trump in Meeting with the National Governors Association," The White House, February 27, 2017, accessed November 19, 2020, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-meeting-national-governors-association/.

The quick and unexpected end of the Cold War left in place much of the institutional and conceptual infrastructure that had been out together to fight it, even as the underlying conditions that reconciled the American public to the costs of the Cold War were eroding. The post-Cold War "unipolar moment" saw a gradual return of the older ways of thinking about the United States' role in the world.[1] Engagement and leadership were fine, and existing institutions like NATO were valued. The U.S. even embraced the quixotic effort to spread democracy to the former Soviet Union. The public was willing to support these efforts up to a point, but only when the costs were low. From Mogadishu to Priština, the tolerance for casualties, for enduring commitments, was limited. Of course, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks provided a new sense of purpose – though even then, political leaders were wary of asking ordinary Americans to pay a price in the form of higher taxes or conscription. Eventually, the messy, ambiguous "forever wars" against Al-Qaeda and its ilk only accelerated the backlash against the United States' self-proclaimed role of leader, with opposition to foreign adventures a winning political message for both Barack Obama in 2008 and Donald Trump in 2016. Though in keeping with the traditional patterns of thought about U.S. foreign policy that dominated discussions before 1941, that shift represents a potentially significant obstacle to the idea of a sustained Cold War-style competition with Russia and/or China in the 21st century.

Not only is the nature of the competition itself different – with less of an ideological divide and lower stakes for the United States – but conditions within the United States itself are less favorable to the kind of sustained commitment that the Cold War involved. While China and Russia are in their own ways revisionist powers, especially in their respective neighborhoods, the threat they pose to the United States as such is limited. Nor is the current era of great power competition defined by the contest of political models to anything like the degree of the Cold War. Victory or defeat is unlikely to come with the fall of the political system of one of the sides. Meanwhile, the United States itself faces serious internal problems that will require significant effort (and investment) to repair.

Without the ideological or existential stakes of the Cold War, public support for an assertive strategy of containing Chinese and Russian influence will likely be hard to maintain. Rather, the U.S. is likely to continue the reversion toward its pre-Cold War pattern of seeking to insulate itself from the dangers of the world, and increasingly pass the burden of resisting the expansion of Chinese and Russian influence to others. Pressure on defense spending is already growing, despite the rhetorical emphasis on great power competition. Such skepticism is only likely to grow in time. Like a chronic medical condition, the current era of great power competition is thus likely to require the United States to think more about management and mitigation of negative sequelae than about victory parades.

1 Brands 2016.

Modes of Great Power Competition

One of the most significant factors that will determine the United States' ability to compete with and confront Russia and China is the impact that the activities of Chinese and Russian will have on U.S. interests. The U.S. overcame its traditional aversion to great power competition during the Cold War because the military and political stakes were perceived as existential. The Cold War was thus not only a "traditional" competition between great powers, but also an ideological struggle where defeat was perceived (by both sides) as fatal to their domestic political orders. While today's competition between the U.S., China, and Russia has ideological elements, the major disputes center on power and interests. Today's era of great power as competition is therefore more likely to resemble the realist competition of pre-1914 Europe than the ideological/political struggle of the Cold War. The distinction is important, because it has implications for how this competition is likely to develop, and will also affect the ability of the United States to sustain an enduring, Cold War-style competition.

Realists focus on power and the anarchic nature of the international order as the main drivers of rivalry and conflict. They often look back to Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War, which, he averred, was caused by "the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta" as the original statement of realist principles.[1] Realists are largely agnostic about the nature of states' internal regimes, suggesting that states (especially great powers) behave more or less the same regardless of the nature of their government. Classical realists blame human nature, what Hans Morgenthau termed "interest defined as power": because humans (and therefore, states) seek power, great power politics is anarchic and characterized by competition without reference to moral considerations.[2] Neorealists like Kenneth N. Waltz, and John J. Mearsheimer point to the distribution of power within the international system as a key variable[3]. Because both classical realists like Morgenthau and "defensive" neorealists like Waltz (who believe states seek to maximize security to survive) view competition in terms of power and interests, they suggest that such competitions can be managed by states' choosing to pursue cautious foreign policies that aim to preserve a balance of power ("offensive" neorealists like Mearsheimer, conversely, argue that states seek security not in balance but in domination, producing instances of "hegemonic war" between rising and declining powers, which Graham Allison recently termed the "Thucydides Trap").[4]

Whereas most realists identify power and interests as the main sources of conflict (and suggest that the type of regime plays a small role, if any at all), liberal theorists, beginning with Immanuel Kant, argue that domestic politics do matter. Traditionally, liberals have argued that democratic states are more pacific, because, as Kant noted, the citizens who must bear the burdens of conflict from taxation to conscription are also the ultimate source of sovereignty.[5] More recent scholarship in the liberal

1 Thucydides 1972, 23.
2 Morgenthau 1978, 4–15.
3 Waltz 1979; 2000; Mearsheimer 2001.
4 Ibid.; Allison 2017.
5 Immanuel Kant, "Perpetual Peace: a Philosophical Sketch," 1795, accessed November 19, 2020, https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/kant/kant1.htm.

tradition has focused on the proposition that democratic states are less likely to fight one another, the so-called democratic peace theory.[1]

In recent years, the study of historical cases has produced several qualifications and revisions to this theory. One of the most important of these, pointed out recently by Casey Crisman-Cox and Michael Gibilisco, posits that, while democracies may rarely fight one another, they are more likely to initiate wars against non-democratic rivals due to the role of public pressure and the ability to cast conflicts in moral terms.[2] According to this view, the role of public opinion gives democratic governments an incentive to ideologize conflicts with autocratic rivals. Such conflicts are likely to be more all-encompassing, ending only with the collapse or disappearance of one of the sides. Some theorists go further, suggesting that great power competition as such – from the Peloponnesian War onwards – is as much about the struggle between democracy and autocracy as it is about interests and power.[3] The recent history of great power competition lends support to this view: World War II and the Cold War, at least, were very much cast in ideological terms, with participants on both sides portraying them as struggles between autocracy (or the more modern concept of totalitarianism) and democracy, and lasting until one of the sides disappeared completely.[4]

Whether the competition between the U.S., China and Russia can be managed more or less effectively or, rather, whether it will accelerate into a Cold War-type confrontation will depend to a significant degree on whether it demonstrates the features of a realist struggle over power balances, or a competition of ideology that takes on a zero-sum mien. If it remains a struggle carried out largely in realist terms, that is, over concrete interests and influence, it may well be manageable short of conflict. If the sides can acknowledge each other as legitimate actors with at least some legitimate interests, it will be easier for them to adopt cautious policies designed to preserve a balance of power, including bargaining and negotiation. If, conversely, the competition is portrayed in ideological terms, it will be harder for the protagonists to accept the legitimacy of one another's claims, and the competition is more likely to take on the appearance of a zero-sum game.

U.S. policymakers appear at least implicitly aware of the distinction between realist and what could be termed ideological competitions. The NSS and other national security documents attempt to portray the competition with Beijing and Moscow in ideological terms. While the countries do maintain rather different political systems, the "ideologization" of the competition with Russia and China also appears to stem from the recognition that the American public remains wary of the costs inherent in great power competition. Drawing parallels with the Cold War allows policymakers and pundits to mobilize public opinion for sustained competition at a time when the United States' own political and economic order seems increasingly troubled and support for overseas engagement can no longer be assured.

1 Russett et al. 1995.
2 Crisman-Cox, Gibilisco 2018.
3 Kroenig 2020.
4 Arendt 2004.

The United States, Great Power Competition, and International Order

Great power competition has been the default mode of international relations in Europe for most of the past five centuries, but a historical outlier for the United States, which only became a "great" power (in terms of capabilities, at least) around the end of the 19th century. The United States' very different historical circumstances have made it in some ways less equipped to operate in a world organized around great power competition than many of its allies or its main rivals, Russia and China.[1] The United States' main experiences of great power competition occurred in the mid- to the late 20th century, first against the Axis powers in World War II, and then against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Both these competitions were characterized by what appeared to be existential stakes that were exacerbated by the clear ideological distinction between the contestants.

For most of its history, the U.S. has been insulated from great power competition, and – World War II and the Cold War notwithstanding – has long had an aversion to the messy compromises and costs that great power competition necessarily entails. Bordered by comparatively pacific and much weaker neighbors to the north and south and oceans to the east and west, the United States has for most of its history been all but immune to foreign invasion or attack. Freed from the dangers that come with facing a peer competitor on its doorstep, the United States developed an approach to the world in which considerations of morality played a much more important role. In line with the Puritan preacher and Massachusetts Bay Colony founder John Winthrop's vision of America as a "shining city on a hill", debates about U.S. foreign policy in the pre-World War II era were conducted largely in terms of vindicating American values and protecting American liberty.

That approach implied rejecting on some level the Old World and its practice of the Machiavellian arts of diplomacy. President George Washington's 1796 farewell address, with its warning "to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world" and "to maintain inviolate the relations of peace and amity towards other nations" remained a guiding light for subsequent foreign policy debates.[2] Likewise, the United States' founding generation was averse to the idea of a permanent military establishment. James Madison, the primary author of the U.S. Constitution, argued against allowing the U.S. to maintain a permanent standing army lest, like ancient Rome, America's liberties "proved the final victim to her military triumphs," while the U.S. Constitution explicitly forbade Congress from appropriating money to the military for longer than two years at a time.[3]

During its subsequent rise to global power, the U.S. rarely faced great power rivals. The main exception was the conflict with Great Britain that is called the War of 1812 (1812–1814) in the United States. In the course of that conflict, a British raiding party managed to occupy and burn much of Washington in August 1814. With the possible exception of the 2001 terrorist attacks, the British occupation of Washington remains

1 Brands, Edel 2019, 64–89.
2 George Washington, "Washington's Farewell Address 1796," Yale Law School, Avalon Project, accessed November 19, 2020, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp.
3 James Madison, "The Federalist Papers: No. 41," Yale Law School, Avalon Project, January 1788, accessed November 19, 2020, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed41.asp.

the most serious attack carried out by a foreign power against the continental United States. Like 9/11, the burning of Washington was shocking because it challenged a deeply held belief that the U.S. itself was immune to the dangers that other powers faced. If 9/11 convinced U.S. leaders to go abroad to hunt down the perpetrators, the War of 1812 helped make the case that the U.S. should stay out of Europe's quarrels and focus on its own area of the world, from which the European great powers were quickly receding.[1]

Committed to upholding the Monroe Doctrine, which sought to exclude any European presence from the Western Hemisphere, the United States would over the course of the 19th century extend its territory to the Pacific coast essentially without opposition – apart from that of the Native Americans, who were displaced and often slaughtered in the process. One of Abraham Lincoln's underappreciated accomplishments during the U.S. Civil War (1861–1865) was preventing international recognition of the Confederacy, thereby excluding participation in the war by any of Europe's great powers.[2] Most of its post-Civil War military engagements were unequal contests with Native Americans or colonial adventures in Latin America and the Pacific. Even Spain, the one European state whose armies the U.S. faced on the battlefield between 1865 and 1914, was at the time of the 1898 Spanish–American War a second-rate power unable to mount an effective defense of its overseas outposts in the Caribbean and the Pacific.

The United States' isolation from the rivalries in Europe was instrumental in its own development as a major power. However, by the turn of the 20th century, the very size of the United States and its presence in the globalizing economy of the day compelled it to take on a larger international role, even if the American public and many of its leaders remained uncomfortable with that role. It was only with the decision to enter the World War in the spring of 1917 that the United States confronted the full reality of great power competition in all its military, ideological, economic, and other aspects. It was not, however, an experience many Americans appreciated or were eager to repeat.[3]

While many leading diplomats and politicians, notably former President Theodore Roosevelt, argued that the threat of a German-dominated Europe posed a direct threat to U.S. interests, the conflict remained distant to most Americans. Even after a German U-boat sank the ocean liner RMS *Lusitania* in May 1915, killing 128 Americans, President Woodrow Wilson was able to successfully campaign for re-election on the slogan "he kept us out of war." It was only after Germany's decision to resume unrestricted submarine warfare and the publication of the so-called Zimmermann Telegram proposing a military alliance between Germany and Mexico – which would have cost the U.S its southwest states – that the balance shifted in favor of U.S. intervention.

Even then, Wilson was only able to win public support for a declaration of war by framing the conflict in ideological terms. Calling the resumption of unrestricted

1 Gaddis 2005, 7–34.
2 Mahan 1999.
3 Jeffrey Mankoff, "Once More Over There: European Security at the End of the American Century," War on the Rocks, April 2017, accessed November 19, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2017/04/once-more-over-there-european-security-at-the-end-of-american-century/.

submarine warfare nothing less than "warfare against mankind," Wilson stated that his objective was "to vindicate the principles of peace and justice in the life of the world as against selfish and autocratic power and to set up among the really free and self-governed peoples of the world such a concert of purpose and of action as will henceforth ensure the observance of those principles."[1]

Wilson's effort to re-shape international order along democratic lines – to "make the world safe for democracy," as he put it – went against domestic opposition and Europe's geopolitical realities. America's wartime allies, particularly France, demanded that Germany be permanently weakened in order to restore a balance of power. Meanwhile, domestic opposition blocked Wilson's attempt to secure participation in the new League of Nations. The U.S. military shrank from nearly 4 million men in November 1918 to less than 220,000 just a year later. After the Senate rejected Wilson's Versailles Treaty, Warren Harding was elected president in 1920 promising a "return to normalcy," which implied an end to overseas adventures. With the failure of Wilson's attempt to give World War I meaning as an ideological crusade, his successors – and the American public – turned their collective backs on the messy power competitions engulfing both Europe and Asia in the interwar period.

Despite the growth of extremism and regional conflicts, the 1920s and 1930s were the heyday of U.S. isolationism. With the exception of several thousand troops in the Philippines, the only overseas U.S. deployments between the two world wars were small garrisons stationed in China and around the Caribbean.[2] During both the boom years of the 1920s and the Depression of the 1930s, U.S. leaders avoided being drawn into great power competition. Though strongly criticized in retrospect, this reticence reflected the mood of the era, which was in keeping with pre-World War I ideas about the United States' need to insulate itself from the dangers of the wider world.

Not even the start of World War II could shake the U.S. reticence about a return to great power politics. While Franklin Roosevelt supported the Allied cause indirectly through programs like the Lend-Lease policy, he recognized that public opinion and the Neutrality Acts of the 1930s prevented more direct assistance, even after German forces occupied Poland, Denmark, Norway, the Low Countries, and France in 1939–1940. Had German leader Adolf Hitler not gratuitously declared war on the U.S. four days after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, it is possible the U.S. war effort would have been confined to the Asia-Pacific Theater. Once the war started, Roosevelt was able to maintain public support for a draft, higher taxation, and increased regulation of the economy in large part because he was able to portray the struggle with Nazism (and, to a lesser degree, Japanese imperialism) as a crusade against tyranny.

The U.S. in the Era of Superpower Rivalry

In contrast to the post-1918 period, at the end of World War II, the U.S. did not retreat back into isolation, but built an entire system of alliances and overseas basing arrangements that confirmed its role as a global power, based to a large degree on

1 Woodrow Wilson, "Wilson's War Message to Congress," April 1917, accessed November 19, 2020, https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Wilson's_War_Message_to_Congress.
2 Stewart 2010, 55–74.

the emergence of ideological competition with the USSR in the immediate aftermath of the ideological struggle against Nazism. The combination of ideological rivalry and the visceral fear of nuclear war helped overcome the United States' longstanding reticence about wading into the arena of great power competition. Fighting the Cold War required the U.S. to embrace many of the "realist" tools that figures like Wilson had long disdained, and which could only be justified politically by the perceived stakes of the competition: the balance of power, spheres of influence, and reciprocity.[1] These concepts were rarely embraced by the American public, but were tolerated in large part because for the first time in the modern era, the U.S. believed itself vulnerable, much as the European powers responsible for developing the framework for great power competition in the first place had always been.

Throughout the Cold War, the United States was prepared to regulate the competition by conceding Moscow a sphere of influence, primarily in Eastern Europe, as codified in the 1945 Yalta agreement. While Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet General Secretary Josef Stalin had agreed at Yalta that the liberated European states would establish through "free elections Governments responsive to the will of the people," Soviet military occupation ensured that governments in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, and Poland eventually fell under Communist control.[2] Many Americans thus criticized the Yalta agreement as a betrayal of U.S. values. Senator Joseph McCarthy pointed to the Yalta agreement to bolster his case that Communist agents had infiltrated the United States Department of State, while later critics called Roosevelt weak for allowing Eastern Europe to become "captive nations" of the Soviet Union.[3] Criticism spiked when the U.S. stood by as Soviet-backed Communist parties seized power across much of Eastern Europe in 1947–1948, or when Soviet troops put down anti-Communist risings in East Germany (1953), Hungary (1956), and Czechoslovakia (1968).

Not only did great power competition force the United States to confront the limits of its power, it also led Washington to undertake the same kind of Machiavellian actions it had criticized other states for in the past. In much of Latin America, Asia, and parts of Africa, the U.S. kept Communist (or even moderately leftist) movements out of power by supporting brutal, corrupt military regimes and guerrillas. Elsewhere, Washington sponsored coups against democratically elected leaders seen as being too close to Moscow, including Mohammad Mosaddegh in Iran and Salvador Allende in Chile. The Vietnam War, which the U.S. prosecuted for the kind of amoral, balance of power considerations that have always characterized great power competition, crystallized a backlash at home and sparked large-scale social unrest that eventually forced Washington to withdraw.

The seemingly existential stakes of the Cold War also forced the United States to agree to tie its own hands and tolerate an unprecedented degree of vulnerability

1 Gregory D. Foster, "Why the Founding Fathers Would Object to Today's Military," Defense One, July 2013, accessed November 19, 2020, https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2013/07/why-founding-fathers-would-object-todays-military/66668/.
2 "Yalta Conference Agreement, Declaration of a Liberated Europe," Woodrow Wilson Center Digital Archive, February 11, 1945, accessed November 19, 2020, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116176.pdf.
3 Jason Deparle, "The World; the Bitter Legacy of Yalta: Four Decades of What-Ifs," New York Times, November 1989, accessed November 19, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/1989/11/26/weekinreview/the-world-the-bitter-legacy-of-yalta-four-decades-of-what-ifs.html.

as the price of stability. Beginning with the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) in 1969, Washington and Moscow negotiated an interlocking set of agreements to cap the number of nuclear warheads and delivery vehicles in each other's arsenals. Among other agreements, the SALT process produced the 1972 Antiballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty) limiting the number and types of systems that either side could deploy to protect their respective homelands from attack. The arms control process, and the ABM Treaty in particular, was designed to regulate the Cold War-era condition of mutually assured destruction (MAD), ensuring that neither Washington nor Moscow could launch a devastating first strike. It rested on an acknowledgment that strategic stability was best served by ensuring that both sides retained an ability to retaliate.

MAD and the agreements sustaining it were likewise subjected to widespread criticism in the United States, both from the antiwar left that saw them as literally mad, as well as from the more ideological right that sought security in primacy. By the mid-1970s, Ronald Reagan had become the leading spokesman for the latter, and his victory in the 1980 presidential election was seen at the time as a defeat for the arms control process and the idea of regulating U.S.–Soviet strategic competition on the basis of MAD. Reagan's support for a space-based anti-ballistic missile system (the Strategic Defense Initiative, mocked as "Star Wars" by critics) that contravened the ABM Treaty was popular in the United States largely because it promised to restore the invulnerability of the U.S. homeland, insulating Americans from the costs of sustaining the Cold War. The SDI was never built and Reagan ultimately surprised both supporters and critics by becoming a latter day convert to arms control, but the United States' enduring, almost "theological" belief in missile defense (regardless of its cost, efficacy, or effects on strategic stability) reflects the same desire for insulation from the threats and troubles of the wider world.[1]

The New Era of Great Power Competition

The costs of these compromises to U.S. values and security, which the country accepted during the Cold War, look easier to justify in retrospect because the Cold War ended peacefully and left the United States in a position of unmatched global power. While nothing about that outcome was preordained, it has powerfully shaped U.S. strategic culture, giving rise to potentially unrealistic expectations about the nature of the very different strategic competition unfolding today with Russia and China. It is easy, in other words, to romanticize the Cold War or to see it as more "normal" than it really was. As the U.S. starts to re-embrace the logic of great power competition, it risks assuming that the Cold War-era template – realist activities justified in ideological terms – can be applied in what looks to be a very different strategic and political context. For multiple reasons though, competition with China and Russia in the 21st century is not likely to resemble competition with the USSR in the 20th century.

First, neither Beijing nor Moscow is likely to make itself quite so easy to mobilize against. Both Russia and China have learned from the Soviet Union's mistakes and are unlikely to repeat them. Beijing has made study of the Soviet

1 "Missile Defense: National Missile Defense: Defense Theology with Unproven Technology," Center for Arms Control and Nonproliferation, accessed November 19, 2020, https://armscontrolcenter.org/issues/missile-defense/.

experience *de rigueur*. As it carries out its own plans for economic development, entire schools of thought have emerged around assigning blame for the collapse of the Soviet Union.[1] Even President Xi Jinping has weighed in on this debate, arguing that the Soviet leaders' "ideas and convictions wavered" to the point that "all it took was one quiet word from Gorbachev" for the whole thing to come crashing down.[2] Preventing the same thing from happening is central to Xi's efforts to shore up Communist Party authority through a mix of anti-corruption measures and draconian crackdowns on civil society.

In Russia too, many analysts, scholars, and officials have made avoiding the mistakes of the late Soviet era a priority. Moscow has been particularly cautious in its handling of the economy, seeking to prevent a recurrence of the scarcity that was a feature of late-Soviet life and was instrumental in draining the system of legitimacy. It is also much more conservative with military spending; whereas the Soviet Union's defense budget may have eaten up as much as a quarter of the country's GDP by the 1980s, Russia's military spending peaked in 2016 at 5.5% of GDP, and was less than 4% in 2019, despite the modernization of its weapons systems and ongoing interventions in Ukraine, Syria, and elsewhere.[3] Russian officials, including President Vladimir Putin, have stated publicly that they will not engage in a costly arms race with the United States.[4]

While the possibility of future breakdowns in Russia, China, or both is certainly within the realm of possibility given the inherent fragility of authoritarian systems, both are far more nimble and open – and unconstrained by ideology – than the USSR was. Even if their current governments disappear, it is far from clear that Chinese or Russian foreign policy would change all that much. The aspiration for great power status (and the material bases underpinning it) are deeply entrenched in both countries for reasons of history, culture, geography, and other factors largely independent of the figure sitting in the Kremlin or Zhongnanhai.[5]

Chastened by the costs of their own ideological and strategic overreach, Beijing and Moscow today are both much more realistic about their ambitions, which center on gaining/sustaining regional primacy and, in a kind of ironic repudiation of Wilson, making the world "safe for autocracy" by challenging the normative hegemony of liberal democracy, rather than fomenting revolution.[6] While the U.S. built up a network of liberal international institutions in partnership with liberal civil society, China and Russia have placed a new emphasis on transforming and bypassing those institutions to create a parallel architecture of illiberal institutions. Bodies like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation lack the commitment to openness and accountability at the core of Western-sponsored institutions like, for instance, the OSCE, whose role they seek to usurp. This alternative infrastructure is aimed at socializing different

1 Greer Meisels, "What China Learned from the Soviet Union's Fall," The Diplomat, July 2012, accessed November 19, 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2012/07/what-chinya-learned-from-the-soviet-unions-fall/.
2 Chris Buckley, "Vows of Change in China Belie Private Warning," New York Times, February 2013, accessed November 19, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/15/world/asia/vowing-reform-chinas-leader-xi-jinping-airs-other-message-in-private.html.
3 Siemon T.Wezeman, "Russia's Military Spending: Frequently Asked Questions," SIPRI, April 2020, accessed November 19, 2020, https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2020/russias-military-spending-frequently-asked-questions#:~:text=Although%20Russian%20military%20spending%20decreased,3.9%20per%20cent%20in%202019.
4 "Vladimir V. Putin's Interview with Al Arabiya, Sky News Arabia and RT Arabic," the Kremlin, October 2019, accessed November 19, 2020, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61792.
5 Mankoff forthcoming.
6 Jessica Chen Weiss, "A World Safe for Autocracy? China's Rise and the Future of Global Politics," Foreign Affairs 98, accessed November 19, 2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-06-11/world-safe-autocracy.

norms, particularly around sovereignty and the right of states to determine their own political model without outside interference.[1]

While this struggle to shape international institutions reflects the differing political systems and ideological outlooks of the major powers, it is a far murkier divide than those of either World War II or the Cold War – and will consequently make it more difficult for U.S. officials to mobilize public opinion to bear the costs. The Cold War was characterized by two superpowers presenting highly differentiated political and social models throughout the "Third World," while focusing to varying degrees on transforming the other's political system. The ideological lines between the 21st century United States and its great power rivals are less clearly drawn.

U.S. officials and many U.S. commentators seek to portray the competition with Russia and China in ideological terms. The NSS suggests that the competition is between "those who favor repressive systems and those who favor free societies."[2] Hal Brands argues that for Beijing and Moscow, "authoritarianism is more than an approach to governing or a means of enriching a corrupt ruling class. It is an ideology in its own right – a distinctive way of looking at the world."[3] That way of looking at the world, however, is mostly about domestic political order within China and Russia. Both Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping are convinced their respective political models (which are in fact quite different) are superior to Western-style democracy. Yet neither Beijing nor Moscow aspires in a serious way to export their political systems, in the sense of implanting a Putinist or Communist Party-led regime elsewhere. In other words, they may be authoritarian, but they are more than willing to work with and through democratic regimes abroad, taking advantage of their openness to establish points of leverage – for instance through investment in strategic industries or corrupting political and judicial institutions. While analysts in the West interpret the threat from these activities differently, as a matter of policy, it will be much harder to mobilize public support for a campaign against corruption (from which plenty of U.S.-based institutions and individuals benefit) than it was to mobilize the ideological crusade against Communism.

Along with the opposition between "free" and "authoritarian," Washington also emphasizes a distinction between "liberal" and "illiberal" systems. Unlike Communism, though, "illiberalism" is defined not so much by what it stands for as what it stands against, i.e. liberalism. It is not a coherent ideology at all, and the role of Beijing and Moscow in supporting it is again less about transforming other states in their own image than it is about in challenging the "normative hegemony" of liberalism that has existed since the end of the Cold War, i.e. the idea that Western-style liberalism is the only legitimate form of political organization. Former Kremlin adviser Vladislav Surkov's notion of "sovereign democracy," or the idea that each state gets to decide for itself what "democracy" means, is perhaps the clearest articulation of this principle. Tellingly, Russia's foreign allies and partners thus come from all over the ideological spectrum, from Germany's far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) to Greece's far-left

1 Alexander Cooley, and Daniel H. Nexon, "How American Hegemony Ends: the Unraveling of American Power," Foreign Affairs 99, accessed November 19, 2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-06-09/how-hegemony-ends.
2 "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," The White House, 2017, accessed December 10, 2020, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf.
3 Brands 2018, 66.

Syriza to much in between. Russia's information operations in the United States before the 2016 elections focused on stoking polarization on both sides of the spectrum. Similarly, China cultivates partners from across the political spectrum, chosen less for their ideological beliefs than for their willingness to adopt China-friendly policies.

The ideological element of the current competition also differs greatly from the Cold War because the contrasts between systems is not nearly as clear cut. Democracy and liberalism are under pressure across much of the West itself, even as Western governments aim to highlight them to draw a contrast with China and Russia. As Freedom House, an NGO that works to promote democracy, notes, U.S. "democratic institutions have suffered erosion, as reflected in partisan manipulation of the electoral process, bias and dysfunction in the criminal justice system, flawed new policies on immigration and asylum seekers, and growing disparities in wealth, economic opportunity, and political influence."[1] Illiberal regimes have also taken power in several Western countries, including established democracies, and while critics have been quick to blame Russian interference for this outcome, most illiberal parties and leaders are homegrown, reflecting status anxiety at a time of pallid growth and accelerating cultural change.[2]

This erosion of democratic governance and liberal norms makes it more difficult for the United States to draw out a meaningful contrast with Russia and China. It is also likely to complicate efforts to mobilize the American public behind an enduring competition with them. President John F. Kennedy's promise that Americans will "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty" sounds quixotic – not to mention quaint – in a world where the challenges to liberty lie much closer to home.[3] While national security professionals take the challenge of sustaining a U.S.-led global order and U.S. influence in both Europe and Asia seriously, that project is a much harder sell outside the Washington Beltway. Though ordinary Americans may support U.S. engagement in the world, and regard the prospect of a China-dominated East Asia or a Russia-dominated Eastern Europe with discomfort, it is less clear that they will support the tradeoffs that will be needed to guard against that outcome.

Looming over everything is the state of the United States' own political and economic health, especially at a time of mounting economic difficulty caused in part by the COVID-19 pandemic, but with its roots in the 2008 global financial crisis, the country's growing indebtedness and inter-generational distributional conflicts, and, since May 2020, the most significant social unrest since the 1960s. The comparative lack of ideological competition with Russia and China mean that the United States of the 21st century is going to have a harder time making the case that the tradeoffs and compromises that are necessary for great power competition, and which the U.S. itself was willing to make during the Cold War, are actually needed – or to sell them to allies who have their own reasons for seeking closer ties with Beijing and/or Moscow.

1 "United States. Freedom in the World 2020," Freedom House, accessed November 19, 2020, https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-states/freedom-world/2020.
2 Anne Appelbaum, "A Warning from Europe: the Worst is Yet to Come," The Atlantic, October 2018, accessed November 19, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/10/poland-polarization/568324/.
3 "Inaugural Address of John F. Kennedy," Yale Law School, Avalon Project, January 1961, accessed November 19, 2020, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/kennedy.asp.

Compared to much of the Cold War era, the future of the U.S. economy looks far less certain in the face of its huge national debt, an ageing population, crumbling infrastructure, and political gridlock. With the global financial crisis of 2008 and the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, the U.S. has also endured two massive recessions in just over a decade. Growth averaged just 1.67% per year from 2008–2019, and is likely to decline further once the consequences of the pandemic are clear. U.S. debt has exceeded GDP since the mid-2000s, and has expanded rapidly under the Trump Administration because of unfunded tax cuts and increased domestic spending. While global volatility and the role of the dollar as a reserve currency has kept U.S. borrowing costs low, debt service payments will eat up an increasing share of government revenue in the future. The possibility of a more serious recession or inflation that erodes U.S. purchasing power cannot be ruled out over the medium term.

Meanwhile, domestic expenditures are likely to rise, not only because of the continuing need for fiscal stimuli in the face of the coronavirus pandemic, but also because the U.S. population is ageing. The ratio of productive workers to retirees is growing, and health care and other social services costs are rising. of course, other countries face similar problems, including China and Russia (China's ratio of workers to retirees is even worse thanks in part to the one-child policy that was in place from 1979 to 2015). But because the United States is a democracy, it faces a higher bar in convincing citizens to support spending for guns rather than butter, especially if its citizens do not see a clear and present danger to their security from abroad.

The U.S. in the New Era of Great Power Competition

Even before the tripartite health/economic/political crisis of 2020 had coalesced, calls for a more restrained approach to U.S. foreign policy were making headway in both political parties, and with a younger generation that has no memory of the Cold War.[1] Such calls for restraint emerged not long after the end of the Cold War, but were temporarily overshadowed by the shock of the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. While now largely forgotten, George W. Bush campaigned in 2000 for a "humble" U.S. foreign policy, and listed U.S.–Mexico relations as the country's most important foreign relationship. Barack Obama first came to national prominence because of his opposition to the Iraq War, and as president pushed to get U.S. troops out of both Iraq and Afghanistan, and to draw down the U.S. presence in Europe in order to focus attention on Asia.[2] Despite an emphasis on increasing military spending and the rhetorical focus on great power competition in documents like the NSS, Trump's largely transactional view of alliances and skepticism about overseas commitments represent less a repudiation of recent U.S. foreign policy than an intensification of trends long visible beneath the surface.[3]

1 Stephen Wertheim, "The Price of Primacy: Why America Shouldn't Dominate the World," Foreign Affairs 99, accessed November 19, 2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2020-02-10/price-primacy.

2 Stephen M. Walt, "The Broken Policy Promises of W. Bush, Clinton, and Obama," Foreign Policy, accessed November 19, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/18/broken-foreign-policy-promises-bush-clinton-obama-iraq-syria/.

3 Michael Birnbaum, "As Trump Hammers NATO Allies on Defense Spending, Military Planners Worry about his '2 Percent' Obsession," Washington Post, accessed November 19, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/trump-wants-all-of-nato-spending-2-percent-on-defense-but-does-that-even-make-sense/2018/07/10/6be06da2-7f08-11e8-a63f-7b5d2aba7ac5_story.html.

With Americans facing a mounting series of crises at home and fatigued from two decades of grinding and inconclusive warfare in the Middle East, great power competition offers what seems like a more comforting alternative. After all, the United States' recent experiences of great power competition – during World War II and the Cold War – cast the U.S. in a generally positive light. Both conflicts had clear moral stakes and concluded with the defeat and dissolution of the other side. Not only could the U.S. plausibly claim to be on the side of the angels (notwithstanding the litany of abuses it tolerated on the part of its many "allies"), the sacrifices could be justified in retrospect by the triumphant ends to both conflicts.

A danger exists in seeing these conflicts, especially the Cold War, as typical examples of great power competition, or in using them as a template for U.S. foreign policy in the 21st century. For the United States to sustain a Cold War-style great power competition with China and Russia, it will need to convince the American public that the stakes are high and the dangers great enough to justify the costs. The history of U.S. foreign policy, with the exception of the period from 1941 to 1989, is one in which great power competition was more the exception than the rule. The subsequent unipolar moment allowed the United States the luxury of believing that it could shape the world in its own image at minimal cost. The emergence of new great power rivals in Russia and China suggests that the U.S. will either have to trim its ambitions or accept much higher costs. Without a clear moral or ideological divide and with the United States facing domestic challenges perhaps as severe as any since the Civil War, that case will be a very difficult one to make.

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США в мире соперничающих великих держав

АННОТАЦИЯ

Принятая в 2017 г. Стратегия национальной безопасности зафиксировала поворот Вашингтона к «конкуренции с великими державами» в качестве концептуальной основы внешней политики США. Этот переход представляет собой признание того, что «бесконечные войны» на Ближнем Востоке оказались дорогостоящим, стратегически сомнительным отвлечением внимания от более насущного вызова, исходящего от «ревизионистской России» и растущего Китая. На восприятие конкуренции с великими державами влияет опыт холодной войны – именно тогда США столкнулись с равным по потенциалу конкурентом. Однако холодная война была исключением из истории внешней политики США, продуктом очень специфических обстоятельств, которые вряд ли повторятся в XXI веке. Существует опасность рассматривать холодную войну как типичный пример конкуренции великих держав или использовать ее в качестве шаблона для внешней политики США в XXI веке.
Для того чтобы такая страна, как Соединенные Штаты, вступила в новый этап соперничества с великими державами, Китаем и Россией, её руководству необходимо убедить американскую общественность в том, что риски для национальной безопасности – высоки. Без идеологических отсылок к эпохе холодной войны, вероятно, властям США будет трудно поддерживать общественную поддержку проактивной стратегии сдерживания китайского и российского влияния. Автор приходит к выводу, что в США, скорее всего, возобладают изоляционистские настроения, и Америка будет стремиться оградить себя от опасностей мира, перекладывая военно-политическое бремя сопротивления расширению китайского и российского влияния на других игроков.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

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