

Advice for a Dark Age: Managing Great Power Competition

Whether we like it or not, the world has entered an era of multipolar struggle. A mix of structural pressures and self-fulfilling choices by key players have brought about this dangerous state of affairs. Today, the United States, Russia and China, as well as designated “rogue” regimes Iran and North Korea, are entering a state of protracted and intensifying security competition. The ever-evolving lesser menace of Islamist terrorism will persist, too, as a wild card that could also provoke exertions of power. In the medium term, this shift is probably irreversible. Washington’s experience of unipolar dominance, and decades of unrivalled hegemony, leave it ill-prepared to deal with this new reality. Given the high stakes, some counsel is due. To prevail in these conditions, it will need intellectual resources other than nostalgic appeals to a lost unipolar order.

This article is an effort in that direction. It proceeds in two parts. First, I demonstrate that cumulative offensive “moves” by major powers have brought about a state of competitive multipolarity. Second, I offer some advice, in four main parts, on how Washington should manage it: it should rank and divide adversaries, rebuild diplomatic capability, apply fresh discipline to its alliances, and beware of brushfire wars. While the age of competition is inescapably upon us, prudent choices can help make the difference between competition and catastrophe.

Where We Are

Whereas in the immediate post-Cold War era, the international pecking order was once clear, it is now blurred. Several interlocking forces have brought this about—

Patrick Porter is a professor of International Security and Strategy at the University of Birmingham. He can be reached by email at p.porter@bham.ac.uk or on Twitter @PatPorter76.

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from the structural to the contingent. These include a relative shift of wealth and demographic change; the diffusion of technology; the development of disruptive military capabilities that raise the costs of power projection; the destabilization of the Middle East through dysfunctional political settlements, the Iraq War and the Arab Spring; and the determination of revisionist actors to alter the balance.

The United States has traditionally regarded three regions as vital geopolitical centers, given their concentration of power and resources: Europe, East Asia and the Middle East.¹ All three are now increasingly contested. A revisionist Russia seeks dominance of its “near abroad” and targets the aggregation of states and alliances making up Euro-Atlantic power—particularly along the NATO-Russia frontier, but also by sabotaging U.S.-aligned democracies. In Asia, an expansionist China and a status quo United States are on collision course, from trade to Taiwan. A legacy of revolution, war and power vacuums has set the Middle East aflame with sectarian and geopolitical conflict. Under President Trump, the United States applies “maximum pressure” against Iran, its principal regional competitor, either to induce capitulation or revolution. And North Korea is evidently unlikely to give up its nuclear weapons or its missile program despite recent efforts at *détente*. The summit in Singapore was rhetorically heavy but poor in concrete achievement, and Hanoi ended without an agreement at all. This disappointment is likely to generate further mutual belligerence.

American grand strategy since 1945 has been one of “primacy,” to secure itself by acquiring unrivalled dominance and denying key regions to hostile powers. Against hopes to the contrary, Washington’s consolidation of its primacy since the collapse of the Soviet Union has not created an international order content to submit to its will. Despite—or because of—expanded alliances in Europe and Asia, a globe-girdling military presence, wars of regime change and occupation, and the spread of capitalism on Washington’s terms, U.S. rivals have amassed greater capability and increased appetite for risk-taking. Additionally, U.S. allies are hedging—for instance through their participation in the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) or their opposition to Washington’s abrogation of the JCPOA nuclear agreement and its new sanctions against Iran, all over the United States’ urging.² Emerging powers, such as India, also hedge, sharing intelligence with Washington while buying S-400 missiles from Russia and muting criticism of Beijing.³ And American allies in Asia are investing increasingly heavily in defense. Though this has come partly through U.S. urging, it could tip potentially into an arms race.

The United States is not willingly accepting these developments that undermine its primacy. It neither makes major concessions nor willingly shares power. Despite President Donald Trump’s campaign rhetoric, the United States on his

watch pursues a more illiberal version of dominance, enlarging its footprint in Europe, the Middle East and Asia.⁴ Trump has drawn down a small garrison in Syria, but increased the overall U.S. presence in the Gulf, and his administration is attempting to isolate and contain Iran. Trump's domestic opponents, too, show no signs of renouncing the pursuit of primacy abroad. Apart from opposing his trade wars, they denounce the White House for being too accommodating to adversaries and not supportive enough of allies. With escalating rivalries underway against two Eurasian heavyweights, Russia and China, and potential confrontations with two designated proliferation "rogues" in Iran, North Korea and possibly Venezuela, the United States is in danger of being locked into combat with five adversaries simultaneously.

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How did we get here? Until recently, some observers argued that competitive multipolarity was not foreordained. Classical realists, including this author, advised that the superpower and its peers should actively negotiate the shift to a more polycentric world.⁵ If, historically, "power transitions" are dangerous, powers could still ease the transition without the eruption of major war, as Britain and the United States did at the turn of the century. Retrenchment of some commitments, mutual accommodation, power-sharing bargains and spheres of influence could stabilize relations, lower the mutual sense of threat, accord other powers space to grow, and facilitate the capacity to cooperate in areas of shared interests. Instead of courting insolvency, the United States could regain its footing.⁶ From a liberal internationalist position, others prophesied that competitive multipolarity was a thing of the past. A "liberal world order" of institutions, free trade, permanent alliances and norms of sovereignty and human rights would prevail, and even convert would-be competitors, locking in the states of the international system even in a post-American world.⁷ The tectonic plates of international order were shifting away from violent competition.⁸ Even if we are seeing an intensification of great power antagonism, they argued, a "free world" is still possible, if the United States strives to rebuild it.⁹ Neoconservative hawks, who put a premium on political will, argued that if only the United States summoned the belief, and avoided the disease of "declinism," it could perpetuate the *Pax Americana*.¹⁰ Others argued that U.S. material and structural power is so great that it need not embark on risky, belligerent behavior—in other words, that there is no "power transition" underway to prevent.¹¹

For better or worse, neither Washington nor its adversaries heeded this advice. Though we critics of primacy will still make the case for a new grand strategy, as things stand a shift away from the pursuit of U.S. dominance is not the direction of travel. We are entering a period of competitive multipolarity partly because major

players have decided to. The declaratory statements of Washington, Beijing and Moscow are unambiguous. The United States' *National Security Strategy* of 2017, its 2018 *National Defense Strategy* and *Nuclear Posture Review* explicitly speak of a world of interstate strategic competition and a "rapidly deteriorating threat environment."¹²

Judging from public pronouncements and officials' observations, China is now viewed as aspiring for dominance in the Asia-Pacific and eastern Eurasia more broadly, bidding for primacy by evicting the United States.¹³ Across multiple dimensions, China is seen as asserting itself aggressively, seizing disputed territories in the South China Sea, infiltrating the domestic politics of U.S. democratic allies as far away as Australia, openly threatening Taiwan with reunification by force, and attempting to bring states into its orbit via the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of infrastructure development.

Russia is in a state of "mobilization," having enhanced its readiness to respond to emergencies in an "arc of crisis" around its borders, from the Baltic states to Ukraine and the Black Sea to the Caucasus.¹⁴ Whether it is primarily driven by revanchist imperial power ambitions, by a desire to rebuild its domination of the "near abroad," or is defensively fending off the expansion of the Euro-Atlantic world into its orbit, it accepts security competition with the United States as a fact of life. Moscow fears that the superpower sponsors subversion and "color" revolutions—externally sponsored mass uprisings to overthrow governments—along its frontiers and within its capital. Ominously, it regards major war as a strong possibility.¹⁵

In March 2018, Russia used a chemical weapon on the soil of the most senior American ally, the United Kingdom, attempting to kill a former defector and his wife using a nerve agent.¹⁶ This act of aggression narrowed the debate within the British and U.S. government and security services about Russia's hostile intentions. Far from being accepted as a great power with legitimate security interests to be negotiated with, Russia in western eyes increasingly resembles a predator. Its attack in Britain followed a series of Russian actions over the past decade perceived by the West as the actions of an offensively-minded greedy state, from its invasion of Georgia in 2008 to the seizure of the Crimea in 2014 to its ongoing campaign supporting secessionists in Ukraine, its military probes of air and sea space proximate to NATO's borders, its cyber-mischief, its use of "dark money" to sabotage western democratic politics, and its support for Syria's tyrant Bashar al Assad. While its aggregate wealth and power is considerably less than NATO's, it retains advantages such as localized military superiority, a ruthless intelligence network, its pioneering expansion of asymmetric tactics and information warfare, and a large nuclear arsenal. Russia also has a reputation—justified or not—of being willing to resort suddenly to nuclear use against military targets to settle conflicts on its terms, given its rehearsal of such scenarios in doctrine and

deed.¹⁷ This record makes it difficult to press alternative arguments about the need for mutual accommodation, as Russia's record at least since Putin's return has reinforced the designation of the country itself, and not interactions between Russia and the West, as a principle source of threat.¹⁸

What will this evolving world of protracted security competition look like? Historical multipolar periods suggest underlying dynamics: antagonistic powers will seek to maximize their security at others' expense; competition will feature constant measures to seize advantage in areas short of head-on combat. This includes expansion into and around disputed territories; espionage and theft; competition for allies; competition for legitimacy through propaganda; trade wars; competition for military advantage, both nuclear and conventional; arms races and the abandonment (or loosening) of mutual restraints such as arms control treaties. In the field of cyberwar, actors will fear all-out strikes on critical infrastructure, and prepare such capabilities for themselves. Nuclear weapons will probably have a restraining effect at the highest level of competition, and reduce the chances of miscalculation, but if growing instability heightens reciprocal fear of surprise attack, it also makes miscalculation potentially deadlier. New technologies from communication to weapons systems will lend the competition greater velocity.

As fears rise, states may lose sight of geographical limitation, viewing threats not as discrete, but monolithic and worldwide. They will fear the fall of dominoes, leading to the loss of international credibility and the defection of allies. Defensively-motivated actions will resemble and appear as offense, creating an "action-reaction" spiral.¹⁹ Self-protective forward deployments will look like encirclement. Efforts at negotiation will attract suspicions of cheating. Support for human rights will look like fomenting revolution. All sides will adopt images of the enemy that become self-fulfilling. Great powers will see adversaries as one-dimensional, predatory, greedy states, without legitimate security interests, that can only be countered by creating situations of strength that give firm signals of resolve. An "us" versus "them" mentality is likely to emerge, where "we" have benign motives and must look strong to repel the aggression of malign states and evil empires, and "they" are a killer breed that looks to probe our weaknesses and test our commitment. In a nuclear world, states will not ordinarily seek major war, just seek the fruits of that war by other means. To prevent decline and unfavorable power shifts, they will conduct proxy wars, initiate crises and dangerous games of "chicken" to coerce concessions.²⁰

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In sum, a competition is emerging that could be more unconstrained and unaffordable than it needs to be. As far as possible, the United States should seek to get a handle on the action-reaction dynamic to manage such competition. How?

Managing Competition

If the United States and others insist on great power competition, how can it do so prudently? Washington and its allies are already taking steps in some untraditional policy areas, for example to prevent hostile control of critical national infrastructure by screening the investments of state-owned enterprises from hostile powers, and reviewing digital defenses and countermeasures against cyber infiltration by hostile actors.²¹ There is a risk, though, that amidst growing attention to the vulnerabilities of information and infrastructure, we overlook other traditional areas. Here I offer four suggestions.

Rank and Split Adversaries

Recognizing that any opportunity for a grand bargain with rivals has passed, seasoned policy hands have urged Washington to contain this or that revisionist power—whether China, Iran or Russia, or all three—or coerce rogue states to denuclearize, or inflict an “enduring defeat” on the Islamic State.²² Any of these efforts may be justifiable. Crucially, though, they cannot all be sustained at once. A more flexible and less dualistic sense of international order is needed, to ensure a more favorable balance against those competitors deemed important enough to confront and prevent bringing about overstretch and self-encirclement (a.k.a. balancing against a more aggressive United States).²³

Washington should decide which adversaries it most wishes to suppress or resist, and in rank order. It should then try to reduce the number of adversaries by limiting the terms of competition, and if possible, create the conditions in which those

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adversaries compete with (or distance themselves from) one another. To divide adversaries would break from recent policy but is not a radical departure, historically. In the mid-20th century, the United States helped defeat the Axis powers by allying with the totalitarian Soviet Union. It prevailed in the Cold War by actively dividing the Soviet Union against China. It defeated Al Qaeda in Iraq by realigning with former Sunni insurgents.

There is little sign of active “splitting” currently, however. (A notable exception is recent collaboration with Beijing over North Korea’s nuclear program, even if it is marred by tension and distrust.)

Rather, the United States is encouraging the perception of a common enemy. By militarily positioning itself within striking distance of Russia and China through a semi-encircling presence in eastern Europe and north-east Asia, expanding alliances, entertaining further expansion, ramping up freedom-of-navigation operations (FONOP) in the South China Sea, reviving the pursuit of an antiballistic missile shield, establishing a reputation as a sponsor of “color revolutions” and as an overthrower of regimes, Washington helps draw Beijing and Moscow closer together into a balancing coalition. A nascent Russia-China alliance is suggested by Russia’s own interagency inquiry into the possibility, the frequency of Putin-Xi contact, deliberate tightening of economic interaction, and overt displays and declarations of close military ties through joint exercises and arms sales.²⁴

It does not have to be this way. The United States has a geopolitical advantage—its distant location. Most powers, most of the time, are more concerned by the potential threat of other nearby land powers than distant sea powers.²⁵ Based in the Western hemisphere, the United States has less of a compelling security interest in adversaries’ backyards, allowing Washington the choice of adopting a more distant pose. Russia and China, by contrast, are neighbors so cannot withdraw, both are primarily continental land-based military powers, and historically such proximity can exacerbate rivalries and mutual fears. Sino-Russian antagonism remains a built-in possibility. Only under the right conditions, though, can the rivalries again grow. This is not a plea for a trilateral realignment whereby one state agrees to be the United States’ “geopolitical hammer” and teams up with Washington to contain the other. Rather, it is to suggest that more American restraint in one theater could make space for Russia-China frictions to take effect in another.

This geopolitical principle will prove controversial. The bipartisan consensus among security experts in Washington is to assume that only a state of preponderance over all rivals will suffice. Policymakers assume that the problem lies in Washington’s failure to apply enough power, or to apply enough power efficiently enough. They then call for the allocation of more resources and their smarter use in order to sustain U.S. dominance. The congressionally-mandated 2018 *National Defense Strategy Commission* report, appointed to make recommendations, is a case in point. It takes dominance as the obvious U.S. national interest. It complains that as rivals challenge American power, U.S. military superiority and its capacity to wage concurrent wars has eroded, due to reduced defense expenditure, and advises that it spend more while cutting entitlements.²⁶ On this logic, a defense budget that is already 10 times the size of Russia’s and four times the size of China’s is not enough, for

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U.S. grand strategy must go beyond defense and deterrence to achieve unchallengeable strength. That the pursuit of dominance could be the source of the problem, not the answer, is not considered.

Even the United States cannot prudently take on every adversary on multiple fronts. The costs of military campaigns against these adversaries in their backyards, whether in the Baltic States or Taiwan, would outstrip the losses that the U.S. military has sustained in decades. Short of all-out conflict, to mobilize for dominance and risk escalation on multiple such fronts would court several dangers. It would overstretch the country. The U.S. defense budget now approaches \$800 billion annually, not including deficit-financed military operations. This is a time of ballooning deficits, where the Congressional Budget Office warns that “the prospect of large and growing debt poses substantial risks for the nation.”²⁷ If in such conditions, current expenditure is not enough to buy unchallengeable military preponderance—and it may not be—then the failure lies not in the failure to spend even more.

Neither is the answer to sacrifice the quality of civic life at home to service the cause of preponderance abroad. The old “two war standard,” a planning construct whereby the United States configures its forces to conduct two regional conflicts at once, would be unsustainably demanding against more than one peer competitor, or potentially with a roster of major and minor adversaries all at once.²⁸ After all, the purpose of American military power is ultimately to secure a way of life as a constitutional republic. To impose ever-greater debts on civil society and strip back collective provision at home, on the basis that the quality of life is expendable for the cause of hegemony, is perversely to set up power-projection abroad as the end, when it should be the means. The problem lies, rather, in the inflexible pursuit of hegemony itself, and the failure to balance commitments with scarce resources.

To attempt to suppress every adversary simultaneously would drive adversaries together, creating hostile coalitions. It also may not succeed. Counterproliferation in North Korea is difficult enough, for instance, but the task becomes more difficult still if U.S. enmity with China drives Beijing to refuse cooperation over enforcing sanctions on Pyongyang. Concurrent competitions would also split American resources, attention and time. Exacerbating the strain on scarce resources between defense, consumption and investment raises the polarizing question of whether preponderance is even worth it, which then undermines the domestic consensus needed to support it. At the same time, reduced investment in infrastructure and education would damage the economic foundations for conducting competition abroad in the first place.

Taken together, indiscriminate competition risks creating the thing most feared in traditional U.S. grand strategy: a hostile Eurasian alliance leading to continuous U.S. mobilization against hostile coalitions, turning the U.S. republic into an

illiberal garrison state. If the prospect for the United States as a great power faces a problem, it is not the size of the defense budget, or the material weight of resources at the U.S. disposal, or popular reluctance to exercise leadership. Rather, the problem lies in the scope of the policy that those capabilities are designed to serve. To make the problem smaller, Washington should take steps to make the pool of adversaries smaller.

Rebuild the State Department

A period of protracted competition will make intensive demands on American diplomacy, especially when competition intensifies to the point of crisis. As the political theorist Hans Morgenthau observed, whereas material components of power are vital ingredients, power itself is ultimately relational and interactive, as it deals with others' minds. Diplomacy, therefore, is of supreme importance as the force that gives life to material instruments of power, as it "combines those different factors into an integrated whole, gives them direction and weight, and awakens their slumbering potentialities by giving them the breath of actual power."²⁹

With this in mind, diplomatic capability is an obvious asset. Diplomats and embassies can generate knowledge, area expertise and early warnings, moderate the policies of others, represent the state skillfully, signal intent and negotiate. Diplomats can also exert informal effects, building international relationships over the span of a career, thereby incrementally adding knowledge and communication channels. And they cumulatively can help shape a coherent overall diplomacy. Yet, the United States has seriously weakened its own diplomatic capacity. If the contemporary era is headed toward competition for trade agreements and crisis eyeball-to-eyeball moments like Cuba in 1962, where the United States will need to communicate effectively to adversaries as well as allies and the international community, a capable diplomatic service skilled at crisis management will be vital. To regenerate it, though, will take investment and time.³⁰

The diminution of the State Department predates Trump, originating with the growing defense, security and intelligence bureaucracies and the militarization of statecraft during the War on Terror. Trump's administration then accelerated the decline of what it sees as a source of dissent, reducing funding by 23 percent. It has done so precisely at the time when the need is growing, not least because the same administration attempts to coerce other states into more favorable trading relationships. Recent research demonstrates a suggestively high correlation between trade promotion activity, embassies or export promotion agencies and the volume of exports, and at a cost that is a fraction of the dividend.³¹ Diplomacy's value persists also at moments of confrontation. Deterrence presupposes communication, and if the United States is prudently to avoid avoidable conflicts

to prevent its power being consumed, effective diplomats will be needed. As Secretary of Defense James Mattis once noted, “If you don’t fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition.”³²

Exert Alliance Discipline

Despite his rhetoric to the contrary, Trump has materially increased American alliance commitments. U.S. troop deployments and investment in NATO have risen, troop deployments to the Middle East and arms sales to Gulf States have risen, and the frequency of FONOPS in Asia has risen. If the United States maintains its alliances and refuses to revise that choice, then it must rediscover what its alliances are for. They are not “ends” in themselves, but means to an end, namely protecting American security interests. To make alliances serve that purpose, however, Washington should exert some discipline on its allies. This is so especially in the Middle East, where U.S. clients too often act in ways that infringe on U.S. security interests. Only recently, it was revealed that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates transferred U.S.-supplied weapons to Sunni jihadi groups with Al Qaeda links in Yemen, adding to a long record of Saudi sponsorship of anti-Semitism in schools and jihadist preaching, as well as passive support for Isla-

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mist causes and organizations. The Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence’s ties with the Taliban and the Haqqani network are well known, admittedly a difficulty Washington has been wrestling with for decades. Cultivated as a bulwark of stability in Central Asia, Kazakhstan has embarrassed Washington with its human rights violations while pursuing defense cooperation with Moscow.

To make alliances work for its interests, the United States should restore what used to be part of its repertoire as a great power—the imposition of conditions on its protection, and the credible threat of abandonment. In other words, contrary to the standard orthodoxy often invoked by Trump’s critics, a critical ingredient in an effective patron-client relationship is the cultivation of a reputation for limited reliability, if not unreliability. Thus, the United States should make clear that it is willing to walk away and that its alliance commitments are conditional on its ally’s prudent behavior. In a world of worsening rivalries, the U.S. ability to control escalation and limit inadvertent spirals depends partly on its capacity to restrain third parties and keep its initiative. To make this threat credible, it may require the United States occasionally to terminate an alliance relationship.

There are fine lines to be walked here. The United States has alliances for the most basic purpose of augmenting its power, its reach and the totality of its

presence. From this perspective, it is in Washington's interests to have militarily proficient friends. But its alliances have other rationales that cut against that simple desire. Another central historical purpose of American alliances in the postwar period is to contain its allies. By providing security, Washington in theory removes incentives for its allies to rearm and reassert themselves as challengers. This imperative, to depress allies' defense expenditure, requires in turn that Washington must establish a reputation for being a reliable security provider. Failure to maintain that baseline of confidence could lead the client to pursue belligerent self-help, or even other allies in lieu of the United States. Yet, establishing a reputation for reliable security provision can and does have a perverse result—it creates a moral hazard. Allies' confidence in American backing can embolden them to behave recklessly in ways that Washington dislikes. Conversely, the dependency Washington forms on the alliance, as an indispensable platform for its power projection, creates reverse leverage, making Washington reluctant to attempt to impose itself with threats of abandonment or even public criticism.³³

Some allied states have tested the possibilities of this relationship with a spirit of adventure, tolerating or encouraging militant Islamist activity, suppressing peaceful protests, committing human rights violations, locking up citizens of allied countries in humiliating and brazen fashion, and threatening or carrying out military campaigns against Washington's wishes with strategically corrosive results, such as the present onslaught in Yemen. Even the most outspoken supporters of the U.S.-Israel alliance will admit that U.S. guarantees have not restrained Tel Aviv from settlement expansion. As Asia becomes more competitive, a rearming Japan could also start to test alliance boundaries, either because of lost faith in American security guarantees or because it takes them for granted. In Eastern Europe, the cast-iron guarantee built into NATO could lead states to miscalculate and behave recklessly against Russian minorities in their own territory, quickly fomenting a cross-border crisis.

There is a difficult balancing act to be struck here, if the United States chooses to maintain allies to increase its material strength while containing those same allies. The threat of abandonment, or withdrawal of patronage, was once a greater part of U.S. diplomatic repertoire behind the scenes.³⁴ The United States explicitly threatened West Germany, South Korea and Taiwan in order to prevent nuclear proliferation, for instance. It seems to have receded to an extent, after the Cold War, when the sense weakened of the need to keep allies in line coercively. Trump's public humiliation of and threats to allies, usually followed swiftly by increased U.S. commitment, are probably too hollow and less effective in the long run than the quiet threats made by past administrations.

Certainly, the United States has an interest in preventing allies being complacent about American guarantees, or worse, of the United States being so anxious about losing access and influence that it dare not exercise it. One of the

superpower's greatest advantage is its ability to leave. This is a possibility it should deftly exploit. Against traditional orthodoxies about "global leadership," the overall U.S. position would benefit from the possibility that Washington might not have an ally's "back" if it behaves recklessly against the superpower's stated preferences, or if it hedges too much in favor of rivals. In other words, U.S. alliances are likely to serve U.S. interests better if it ceases fetishizing them.

Avoid Minor, Open-Ended Brushfire Wars

To navigate an era where competition could stretch resources, time and will in multiple directions, Washington as far as it can should beware of minor, open-ended "brushfire" wars. Brushfire wars are conflicts that seem to begin as "small" engagements but are accompanied by extravagant and growing ambitions, without time limitations or well-defined goals. Such wars normally involve either overthrowing an embattled oppressive government or creating and supporting a corrupt and weak regime. Alternatively, they begin as efforts to curtail a humanitarian disaster or stabilize a war zone, only to inflict unanticipated costs. And they typically endure to the point where an additional "great power" obsession takes hold, namely the feared loss of credibility. These minor wars can, and often do, turn out to be expensive in blood and treasure, compared to what decision makers expected, and "there is always the chance that the great power could miscalculate and find itself embroiled in a protracted and bloody stalemate."³⁵

It takes nerve to recognize and pull back from such traps—President Ronald Reagan's prompt withdrawal from Lebanon after the Beirut bombings in 1983–1984 was a prudent recognition that the stakes were too limited and the costs too high, and that the United States was strong enough to endure the embarrassment of a pullback.³⁶ Time has revealed the complaints of Reagan's critics—that stepping back from that vortex would trigger the collapse of the U.S. international position—to be disproportionate. The capacity to mount a timely retreat may be a taboo in orthodox security circles, yet historically it is a vital part of a state's repertoire.

As things stand, the United States is currently engaged in a quintuple set of potential conflicts, while seeking to maintain global primacy from Russia and China to Iran, North Korea and Venezuela. This situation carries the temptation to view every conflict as linked to all others. All problems, crises and military campaigns, no matter how small and remote, will seem interconnected in ways that incentivize increasing entanglement even in conflicts that otherwise would be seen as peripheral to U.S. interests. Viewed as a contest of perceived as well as actual strength, these conditions create the temptation to stay in or escalate fights for the sake of credibility.

The disastrous Iraq war may have induced a temporary reluctance to make major land commitments, just as Vietnam did. Plainly, though, it has not driven Washington to renounce the cause of “regime change,” as Libya, the current effort to precipitate a revolution in Iran, and the demand for a new government in Venezuela all demonstrate. Criticisms, too, over the recent decision to withdraw 2,000 troops from Syria also reflect security elites’ appetite for unending extra commitments. Supporters of a continuing presence in Syria articulated that the United States should stay to inflict an “enduring defeat” on the Islamic State, and to protect the Syrian Kurds from Turkish predation. The political life of the Islamic State, though, feeds ultimately on failures of governance and sectarian strife in the Middle East, including failures by U.S. client states, not on the presence or absence of small garrisons. As Iraq demonstrated, not even much larger and longer-term garrisons were able to correct those political problems. Indeed, repeated reentry by the United States to bail bad governments out create, a moral hazard. And if a temporary alliance of convenience with Kurdish forces to roll back the Islamic State were to become an enduring commitment to shield them, there would be no end in sight. Just as a military presence can temporarily stabilize and suppress a threat, longer-term occupation in regions where levels of resistance are foreseeably high, like Middle Eastern (or Latin American) countries, is more the problem than the solution, attracting incitement and mobilization, and emboldening regimes whose misrule engenders conflict to begin with.

There remains a powerful pathology among the security establishment not to let go of campaigns that were supposed to be limited in aim and duration, and indeed to expand them. Even General David Petraeus, whose signature question during the implosion of Iraq was “tell me how this ends,” now calls for a “generational struggle” against Islamist militancy in the Greater Middle East.³⁷ To be clear: that would literally be another 30-years war, a cure worse than the disease. And in a *reductio*, primacists often treat any pullback, of any scale, as the prelude to global retrenchment. They did so, too, after the withdrawal from Vietnam. Defeat in Vietnam did not persuade Moscow that the United States would abandon Western Europe, any more than the Soviet Union’s bleeding in Afghanistan meant the Warsaw Pact was a paper tiger. What’s more, prudent retreats can be the prelude for successful rebalancing.³⁸ The history of Sino-U.S. relations suggests so. Recall that after withdrawing from its “domino” war in Vietnam, the United States made a grand bargain with Mao’s China that strengthened its position as the dominant state in Asia and put an end to Chinese-backed revolution in the region.

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Evidently, disappointment with Iraq has not dampened the enthusiasm of security commentators for displays of force that are supposed to reassert American majesty, and to suppose that Beijing and Washington base calculations about their most cherished geopolitical interests on whether the United States is willing to bomb far-off countries. As collective memory of the pain of Iraq fades, the argument for major land commitments will strengthen, especially if triggered by a contingent event such as a terrorist attack. Washington is politically able (for the time being) to maintain continuous wars because its model of war-making insulates most of the population from those wars' direct consequences: financing them through debt rather than taxes, and confining the direct burdens to a professional military and a growing private security market.³⁹ Just because most Americans, most of the time, are not directly impacted by those wars does not mean they are not affected. Debts count, the costs of caring for the wounded count, inadvertent consequences count, as does the constitutional damage wrought by conflicts waged by the executive with little congressional oversight. U.S. preponderance thus can encourage the delusion that it can maintain a set of minor "forever wars," even while those wars pile up burdens that contribute to exhaustion.

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If strategy is to mean anything, it must mean limitation. Powers are well advised to avoid waging continuous wars that lack specific, achievable political goals, especially wars to exterminate "isms" that lack geographical boundary. Likewise, as far as possible, Washington should resist the temptation to shape the overall balance of power through the theater of wars to display strength to a global audience.

Such struggles are likely to be internationalized and therefore longer and bloodier, as other powers intervene to bleed their competitor.⁴⁰ Indeed, to get caught in a grinding minor war presents opportunities to one's rivals to inflict attrition from a distance. Recall French support for American revolutionaries against the British Empire; British support for Yugoslav, Greek and Albanian insurgents against Nazi occupation during World War II; Soviet assistance to Viet Cong insurgents against the United States; and U.S. sponsorship of the international *mujahideen* against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Brushfire wars are also likely to involve client regimes whose interests do not harmoniously align with their patron's, and recent history is a reminder of the "misalignment" problem.⁴¹ If anything, getting embroiled in a drawn-out campaign against weaker but determined opponents, where an imbalance of will favors them, is more likely to drain precious resources and divert diplomatic energies, exhibit fatigue rather than strength, exacerbate domestic division and reveal the limits of one's power. Indeed, a war to uphold "dominoes" can trigger a political crisis in the heart of the metropole,

jeopardizing in turn the domestic consensus needed to sustain competition abroad in the first place.⁴²

The continued threat of Islamist terrorism adds to the likelihood of this temptation. To be sure, the phenomenon for the moment is fragmented and lower in the hierarchy of designated threats, and it is now more difficult to pull off a mass casualty on American soil, given the level of surveillance and disruption that the superpower has directed against terrorist groups. The chances are remote, but not zero. And the logic, that an appropriate response to a terrorist attack is to occupy a weak state indefinitely, has endured. Trump himself indicated in a recent interview that he retains U.S. forces in Afghanistan because “virtually every expert” advises that “if we don’t go there, they’re going to be fighting over here.”⁴³ Part of the impulse for belligerence after the 9/11 attacks was to project power in order to signal resolve not to shrink in the face of challengers, as well as prevent dangerous power vacuums or the formation of hostile states. It is not hard to imagine such an impulse returning in a context where policymakers look out on the world as an increasingly contested battlespace.

Before It’s Too Late ...

Superpowers may “not get to retire,” as Robert Kagan once quipped.⁴⁴ But as the dismal history of self-defeating behavior demonstrates, they can put themselves out of business. We advocates of strategic “restraint” warned that on the current course, the United States would find itself in the dangerous condition it faces, of multiple wars, spiraling debt, and an ever more competitive multipolarity. As the United States and its rivals insist on embracing that competition, some other advice is offered.

As the world enters this dangerous period, the United States will be ill-served by exhortations to resist all comers and hold on to a unipolar dominance that is now a thing of the past. Equally, it will be ill-served by denying the reality of the world that it has helped to bring about. It will not suffice, and may have the opposite effect, to seek refuge in hopes that escalation and an insistence on its mantle of “global leadership” will make competitors back off and willingly submit. Rather, it should consider how best to compete prudently, without the competition leading to a downward spiral of American overcommitment, insolvency and exhaustion.

The superpower should take four steps to ensure that a competitive period does not become all-consuming. It should rank and divide adversaries, especially the emerging Russo-Chinese alliance. It should restore its diplomatic capability by rebuilding the State Department. It should impose discipline on alliances, to discourage allies acting as liabilities. And it should beware of wading into crises on the periphery that look minor, but which can take on a life of their own, draining

and dividing the country. Should Washington survive the medium term of this dark multipolarity when “grand bargains” are out of the question, the possibility of lasting mutual accommodation with adversaries may again open up. Until then, there are painful and consequential choices that can no longer be ducked.

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