

The Lost Art of Long-Term Competition

“A disaster’s right upon us,” Homer’s King Nestor tells the Greeks in the darkest hour of their siege of Troy. “Put heads together ... if strategy’s any use.”¹ Today, the United States needs smart strategy if it is to avert a geopolitical disaster of its own. As China and Russia contest U.S. power and influence on multiple fronts, it has become conventional wisdom that the world is entering a dangerous new era of geopolitical conflict. “The central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security,” states the 2018 National Defense Strategy, “is the *reemergence of long-term, strategic competition* by ... revisionist powers.”² Though the diagnosis is widespread, the prescription has proven vexing. Even as myriad observers inside and outside government have described the threat posed by great-power rivals in increasingly dire tones, there is an equally broad consensus that Washington has struggled to formulate an effective response.³

There are many reasons for this, from the behavior of a president who has often seemed more interested in courting than competing with Russia, to the undeniable operational difficulty of countering Moscow’s information warfare or Beijing’s gray-zone expansionism. Yet the fundamental problem is not political or operational, but intellectual. The United States seems off-balance vis-à-vis its rivals because it has lost its familiarity with the art of long-term competition.

Long-term competition—ongoing, open-ended rivalry against one or more great-power opponents—represents the graduate level of strategy. It entails synchronizing initiatives across time, space, and all the elements of statecraft to work toward an objective whose achievement may lie decades in the future. It presumes that simply overwhelming an adversary with superior power is not an

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option, and that success requires creating asymmetric advantages and imposing costs on a dynamic opponent that has its own ideas and advantages. Moreover, although long-term competition can erupt into military conflict, it often demands careful navigation of the geopolitical no-man's land between war and peace. Finally, the imperatives of getting long-term competition right are compounded by the costs of getting it wrong: From the Athens-Sparta rivalry to the Cold War, prolonged great-power struggles have determined the rise and fall of nations and the shape of world order.⁴

The United States was once deeply versed in the challenges of long-term competition due to its 45-year contest with the Soviet Union. And the long history of strategic competition between the great powers offers a wealth of insights that can inform the conduct of modern statecraft. Yet the United States has had the luxury of neglecting its competency in long-term competition for more than a generation in the comparatively benign global environment that emerged after the Cold War ended—an environment that now seems, regrettably, to be deteriorating by the day. Good strategy, as Nestor understood, demands intensive intellectual effort. Washington must reacquaint itself with 12 bedrock principles of long-term competition if it hopes to succeed in the geopolitical rivalries playing out today.

Theory of Victory

The first requirement of long-term competition is that *the United States must have a theory of victory: It must know what it is trying to accomplish and how.* The day-to-day work of long-term competition entails building and exploiting strategic advantages, yet a coherent theory of victory provides the intellectual guardrails within which those efforts occur.

12 Bedrock Principles of Long-Term Competition

- Have a Theory of Victory
- Leverage Asymmetric Advantage
- Get on the Right Side of the Cost Curve
- Embrace the Ideological Competition
- Compete Comprehensively and Holistically
- Operate Multilaterally to Win Bilaterally
- Exploit the Strategic Importance of Time
- Know Your Competition Intimately
- Institutionalize a Capability to Look Forward as Well as Backward
- Understand that Long-Term Competition Is a Test of Systems
- Pace Yourself
- Remember that Competition and Confrontation Are Not Synonymous

Here, the most familiar historical example is also the most useful. What made George Kennan's "X Article," published at the dawn of the Cold War, so seminal

was not that it defined some detailed program for defeating the Kremlin. The document was so influential because it articulated the United States' long-term goal—the eventual breakup or mellowing of Soviet power—and offered a plausible if vague approach to accomplishing it—denying Moscow the fruits of expansion, increasing the strains under which the Kremlin operated, and thereby forcing the Soviet system to bear the brunt of its own failings.⁵

This was a highly ambitious theory of victory, but it was within the United States' power to achieve. Equally important, it steered Washington away from more dangerous approaches such as bringing matters to a head militarily or conceding additional ground in hopes of purchasing Soviet restraint. To be sure, Kennan's thesis was sometimes criticized by those who considered containment either exceedingly aggressive or excessively restrained, and it largely fell to others to construct what Secretary of State Dean Acheson called the "situations of strength"—the coalitions, favorable balances of power, and military and economic advantages—that turned containment into a successful program for deterring and coercing the Soviets.⁶ Yet all these initiatives represented steps toward the destination to which Kennan had pointed.

This is an area where greater intellectual effort is currently required. Throughout the post-Cold War era, the United States' theory of victory regarding Russia and China was that they would be deterred from challenging the U.S.-led international order until they were integrated into it.⁷ While that theory has now been largely discarded, Washington has not clarified its new definition of victory in the intensifying competitions underway. Does the United States seek merely to hold the line—to prevent Russia and China from disrupting a relatively stable, peaceful, and prosperous system? Does it seek to bring about comprehensive diplomatic settlements on favorable terms? Does it seek the breakup of Russian and Chinese power, or the replacement of those countries' regimes? Does it even seek the same objective with respect to two very different rivals? These various options entail different levels of risk and investment, different blends of coercion and reassurance, and different approaches to shaping critical relationships. All of these options have advantages and disadvantages, but arguably the most problematic course would be to embark on a long and potentially dangerous journey without knowing where we are trying to go.

Asymmetric Advantage

Whatever destination one chooses, the nature of competition implies that rivals will resist one's efforts to get there. War, Carl von Clausewitz wrote, is not "the action of a living force upon a lifeless mass ... but always the collision of two living forces."⁸ The same is true of long-term competition. Rivalry between two intelligent actors involves a series of moves and countermoves that may unfold

over the course of years or decades. *Winning a long-term competition thus requires dominating a dynamic interaction—not simply responding symmetrically to every threat as it emerges, but pushing the rivalry into areas of competitive advantage and leveraging one’s asymmetric strengths.*

For decades prior to the Peloponnesian War, the Athenians did not seek to match Sparta’s prowess on land. Rather, they compensated for weakness in this area by developing a thriving maritime economy that could support a dominant navy—which could, in turn, secure the support of allies and strengthen Athens’ overall position. (When, conversely, the Athenians shifted course during the Peloponnesian War, choosing to mount a major land campaign in Sicily, the result was a disaster.⁹) For centuries, the British also largely avoided competing with dangerous continental rivals on a soldier-for-soldier basis. Instead, they relied on the asymmetric advantages provided by geography and economic wealth to build a world-dominant navy that could protect the home islands, safeguard a prosperous global empire, harass British rivals, and fund continental proxies that kept the European balance.

The United States, too, has often relied on asymmetric strategies. Throughout the Cold War, Washington offset superior Soviet manpower with technological dominance underwritten by American economic prowess. And as part of a deliberate shift toward a more aggressive strategy during the late 1970s and 1980s, U.S. officials in the Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan administrations emphasized channeling the arms race into high-tech areas where the Soviets—with their rigid, inefficient economy—were at a tremendous disadvantage. U.S. force development plans emphasized programs—stealth technology, precision-guided munitions, highly accurate nuclear missiles, strategic missile defenses—that would be “difficult for the Soviets to counter, impose disproportionate costs, open up new areas of major military competition and obsolesce previous Soviet investment,” one Pentagon directive explained.¹⁰ These programs would force Moscow either to compete on unfavorable terrain, or bow out of the competition altogether.

The Russians and Chinese are pursuing their own asymmetric strategies today. They are using the advantages of authoritarianism—secrecy, deception, a lack of legal or moral constraints—to launch sophisticated political warfare campaigns that exploit the openness of democratic societies. In the realm of economic statecraft, China is leveraging advantages such as tight control of its import market, investment flows, and state-owned enterprises to weave webs of geo-economic influence around countries in the Asia-Pacific and beyond. Both Moscow and Beijing, moreover, have largely avoided the trap of seeking to match the Pentagon plane-for-plane or carrier-for-carrier. Rather, they have developed anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities meant to exploit a specific American weakness—the extremely long distances U.S. forces must travel to fight in Eastern Europe and the Western Pacific.¹¹

Washington must therefore recommit to identifying and exploiting its own asymmetric advantages. It might explore, as defense analyst Evan Montgomery suggests, using its unmatched array of alliances and partnerships to confront China and Russia with new dilemmas, such as security threats that emerge from unexpected directions.¹² As discussed subsequently, it might take advantage of another asymmetric advantage—the contrast between democratic values and authoritarian repression—to better expose the ideological and political weaknesses of regimes that do not rest on the freely given consent of the governed. In the military realm, it might use pronounced advantages in under-sea warfare and unmanned systems to negate the accomplishments of Chinese A2/AD. The key in all this will be to devote serious intellectual and bureaucratic effort to identifying U.S. asymmetric advantages and making the most of them.

Russia and China are using the advantages of authoritarianism to exploit democratic societies.

The Cost Curve

Exploiting asymmetrical advantages relates closely to a third principle: *dominating a competition means getting on the right side of the cost curve*. A rich country could theoretically prevail by pursuing an inefficient strategy that overwhelms a weaker opponent. But the best strategies—particularly for a resource-constrained superpower—use targeted investments to drive up an adversary’s costs, divert its resources, and weaken its ability to keep pace.

In the early twentieth century, the British did just this, responding to Germany’s naval challenge by significantly expanding its own battleship fleet. It did so on the calculation—which turned out to be correct—that Berlin would find it unbearably expensive to match that buildup, and that efforts to do so would drain resources from more dangerous initiatives such as building a German army which could dominate Europe.¹³ During the late 1970s and 1980s, the United States pursued cost-imposition across multiple fronts. Covert support to anti-communist insurgents drove up Moscow’s costs in the Third World; condemnations of Soviet repression made it more difficult for Moscow to sustain its international legitimacy and political control. Major arms modernization programs also featured cost-imposing intent. By developing new penetrating bombers, the Pentagon exploited Moscow’s longstanding fear of air attack and pushed the Kremlin to invest

There are options for getting back on the right side of the cost curve.

heavily in air defenses that were neither an effective nor an efficient use of resources. Likewise, unveiling the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) and fielding more accurate ICBMs confronted the Soviets with an unpalatable choice between making massive compensating investments and essentially giving up the game. “If they want an arms race,” Ronald Reagan said, the Soviets would have to “break their backs to keep up.”¹⁴

Today, unfortunately, the United States often finds itself the object of cost-imposition. China has invested in ballistic missiles, anti-satellite weapons, and other relatively cheap capabilities that can threaten high-value targets such as aircraft carriers, air bases, and space-based communications, thereby dramatically raising the costs of U.S. intervention.¹⁵ Russia is using low-cost tools such as political warfare and cyber operations to impose high costs on its adversaries. In some respects, those costs are of the traditional, financial sort: It is generally more expensive to defend against cyberattacks than to conduct them. Yet costs are not only financial in nature, and the Kremlin’s strategy shows how targeted investments can exact a high price in terms of political rancor and social instability.

There are options for getting back on the right side of the cost curve. The concept of “archipelagic defense” would use a combination of geography and inexpensive land-based fires (such as short-range anti-ship missiles) to hem in Chinese naval and air forces behind the first island chain and make any effort to break out into the open Pacific prohibitively expensive.¹⁶ Taiwan—with U.S. encouragement—might adopt a defense strategy that uses low-price capabilities such as naval mines, mobile air defense systems, and anti-ship missiles to drive up the costs of a Chinese assault.¹⁷ Moreover, if defending against cyberattacks and political warfare is difficult and expensive, Washington could turn the tables on its adversaries by waging political warfare against them. As three analysts write, even measures as mundane as “[introducing] new information into relatively closed societies ... can be a method of competition that imposes significant costs on regimes that constantly worry about maintaining domestic control.”¹⁸ Looking beyond these specific proposals, what is critical is that the United States get back in the habit of imposing costs rather than having costs imposed upon it.

The Ideological Clash

The United States will not be fully effective in doing so, however, unless it heeds a fourth imperative: *embrace the ideological competition*. Throughout history, geopolitical conflicts between great powers have often been fueled by ideological conflicts between rival systems of government. Today, the United States should play up, rather than play down, the ideological clash between liberalism and authoritarianism.

This is partially a matter of political realism. The struggles the United States is engaged in will likely be protracted rivalries that demand enormous resource

investments and no little perseverance in the face of setbacks, adversity, and sacrifice. Yet it has always been difficult to mobilize Americans for such endeavors without tapping into the rich vein of liberal ideological fervor that runs through the U.S. body politic. In every prior conflict between the United States and a great-power rival, from England under George III to the Soviet Union under Stalin, the United States rooted its exertions not just in response to geopolitical danger, but in a desire to defend its democratic values against authoritarian challenge. “Geopolitical abstractions and economic statistics may be important,” writes Princeton University’s Aaron Friedberg, “but historically what has moved and motivated the American people is a recognition that the principles on which their system is founded are under threat.”¹⁹ If Americans are to gear up for a protracted rivalry with Russia and China, they will require a vigorous public education campaign on the dangers those countries pose, and discussion of the ideological dangers should be prominent within that campaign.

Those ideological dangers should not be difficult to highlight, because competition in the ideological realm is already a major component of contemporary rivalry. Russia and China are arguing that their versions of authoritarian capitalism are superior to the United States’ liberal democracy in meeting the material and spiritual needs of their respective citizenries; Xi Jinping has explicitly described China’s model as a global alternative to the United States’.²⁰ In an effort to enhance their geopolitical influence and make the world safe for autocracy, both countries are also working to strengthen fellow authoritarian regimes, promote illiberal norms such as “Internet Sovereignty” (the idea that countries should be able to exercise exclusive control of their cyberspace in the same way they can restrict their airspace), undermine Western conceptions of human rights and good governance, and corrupt or manipulate democratic systems in the United States and other countries.²¹ To refrain from taking up the ideological struggle, then, would amount to unilateral disarmament.

There persists, in some quarters, a resistance to the idea of defining today’s competitions in ideological terms.²² Yet the fact is that ideological competition should be a particularly promising area of competition for the United States. One reason so many countries have long tolerated or even welcomed U.S. leadership is that the U.S. liberal democracy conducts its foreign and domestic policy on the basis of comparatively enlightened principles. “The moral heart of our international appeal,” wrote future National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski in a speech prepared for Jimmy Carter in 1976, was “as a country which stands for self-determination and free choice.”²³ The foremost vulnerability of the United States’ authoritarian adversaries, by contrast, is that their political systems are highly repressive, extravagantly corrupt, and deeply fearful of the people they govern—features that make them inherently unstable at home and render their ideological appeal shallow overseas.²⁴

By underscoring the contrast between authoritarianism and democracy, by backing democratic forces abroad and defending democratic values at home, and by assisting those who criticize or seek to leaven the illiberal elements of Russian and Chinese rule, the United States can make the most of a fundamental competitive asymmetry.²⁵ Few approaches are better suited to long-term competition than that.

Competing Comprehensively

Thinking broadly about arenas of great-power struggle relates to a fifth principle, which is that *long-term competition should be comprehensive competition*. Washington should not necessarily compete with its adversaries on every geographic front, as explained above, but any serious strategy should incorporate all elements of national power. The United States' authoritarian rivals are employing "comprehensive coercion" that incorporates economic, informational, diplomatic, military, and other tools. It will be difficult for the United States to hold its own absent a similarly holistic response.²⁶ What made U.S. strategy in the late Cold War so effective, after all, was that it deployed virtually every weapon in the American arsenal: intensified military competition, economic warfare, covert action, and political and ideological measures such as support for dissidents within the Soviet Union. Today, by contrast, the United States' strategies are

not nearly so complete.

As former policymaker Robert Blackwill and scholar Jennifer Harris have documented, Washington has failed to define a coherent program of economic statecraft to counter the ambitious geo-economic strategies being implemented by Russia and—more dramatically—by China.²⁷ As these countries have used sophisticated geo-economic instruments to project influence abroad, the United States has either been slow to exploit its own tools (such as abundant energy reserves) or

simply dropped out of the competition (by withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership). In the realm of information and political warfare, the United States has moved only lethargically to strengthen defenses against Russian and Chinese meddling, let alone to redevelop offensive capabilities of its own. Likewise, although the Trump administration has touted a return to "competitive diplomacy," the combination of proposed funding cuts, unfilled vacancies, and marginalization of the State Department will only make U.S. diplomacy *less* competitive.²⁸

The United States has only moved lethargically in information and political warfare.

These deficiencies speak to a further challenge, which is that the bureaucracy has yet to be optimized for comprehensive competition. During the Cold War, the goal of competing with Moscow was imprinted on all aspects of the bureaucracy. Yet today, there are entire areas of critical bureaucratic capability that are either severely underdeveloped or simply missing: a modern version of the U.S. Information Agency that can compete effectively in the information space, for instance. (Since the U.S. Information Agency's shuttering in 1999, U.S. public diplomacy and information warfare capabilities have languished.) There also remains a misalignment between personnel and priorities. At the end of the Obama years, there were "three times as many National Security staffers working on the Middle East as on all of East and Southeast Asia."²⁹ Finally, the U.S. government has only slowly adapted to the fact that challenges such as geo-economic competition or gray-zone conflict, which are highly coercive yet do not reach the threshold of war, often occur in the seams between departments and agencies.³⁰ Now as before, the U.S. government can bring impressive energy and effectiveness to bear on even the hardest problems, but it must first be oriented to the task.

Operating Multilaterally

Succeeding in long-term competition is not, however, simply a matter of utilizing the United States' own capabilities. Rather, a sixth principle posits that *winning bilaterally requires operating multilaterally*. Long-term competition is often focused on a specific opponent, but it occurs in a broader global context. Competing effectively requires setting that context so as to constrain the choices and options of a competitor while broadening one's own.

During the European great-power struggles of the early modern era, the winner of a given contest was often the country that more effectively enlisted the aid of allies while depriving its rivals of foreign support. Those powers that found themselves diplomatically isolated—Paris in the Seven Years' War, London during the conflicts surrounding the American Revolution, Paris again in the Franco-Prussian War—usually suffered.

The same imperatives exist today. In one sense, the most useful initiatives the United States can take vis-à-vis Russia or China have less to do with confronting those countries directly than with improving the strength of the coalitions arrayed against them. Getting China right, as former Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell has said, requires getting Asia right:

The most useful initiatives improve the strength of the coalitions arrayed against Russia or China.

It requires strengthening U.S. engagement with friendly actors, creating economic alternatives to dependence on Beijing, and establishing a strong regional security network that constrains Chinese options for aggrandizement.³¹

In the same vein, the United States' alliances and partnerships represent one of its greatest competitive advantages. These relationships offset one of the United States' chief disadvantages—the fact that Russia and China are located much closer to the key theaters of competition—by giving it strategic presence in Europe and the Asia-Pacific. They provide military punching power and diplomatic influence Washington can call on in a crisis; they offer the moral legitimacy that comes from the United States' role as the so-called leader of the free world. In sum, alliances and partnerships augment the United States' strengths in ways comparatively isolated authoritarians can only envy.³²

It follows that preserving and strengthening the constellation of U.S. alliances and partnerships is one of the most valuable competitive moves Washington can make. Moscow and Beijing understand this, which is why they are working so tirelessly—through economic inducement and coercion, military intimidation, and incremental aggression—to disrupt those relationships. The current U.S. president, however, does not grasp this basic principle. As James Lacey of the Marine Corps War College has written, allies “require substantial care and feeding, particularly in the years before their aid is actually needed.”³³ Moreover, alliances only perform their most useful functions if they are credible—if allies are convinced that their patron will assist them in crisis. Those powers that have flouted these rules have often ended up isolated and weakened. The United States appears to be risking a similar outcome today.

Taking Advantage of Time

A seventh principle is that *long-term competition rewards those who understand the strategic importance of time*. An adept competitor will manipulate the time horizons of rivals, increase or decrease the pace of the rivalry according to perceptions of opportunity or danger, and otherwise use an understanding of time to gain a strategic edge.

Throughout the Cold War, time-based competition was central to U.S. strategy. At the macro-level, the choice of a firm but judicious strategy of containment was based on an assessment that time was on the United States' side, so there was no need to precipitate a military showdown or rush to an unfavorable diplomatic settlement. It was because the Soviet Union was “still by far the weaker party” and “Soviet society may well contain deficiencies which will eventually weaken its own total potential,” Kennan wrote, that that Washington would enter “with

reasonable confidence upon a policy of firm containment.”³⁴ More specifically, U.S. policymakers frequently calculated how assertively to act based on their sense of how the strategic balance would shift over time. During the late 1940s, American policymakers aggressively established facts on the ground—the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, the creation of a West German state and NATO—because they believed that the U.S. nuclear monopoly provided a window of opportunity in which Moscow was unlikely to respond militarily. Following the Soviet A-bomb test in 1949, U.S. policymakers became more cautious about moves that might dramatically escalate the Cold War—such as escalating the war in Korea—until after the military buildup associated with NSC-68 during the early 1950s had restored greater Western advantage. The impact of such time-based thinking, writes historian Marc Trachtenberg, “was both enormous and pervasive.”³⁵

Time has been used as a weapon in other strategic rivalries as well. During the 1870s and 1880s, Germany’s Otto von Bismarck believed that his country could eventually become Europe’s dominant power—but only after passing through a danger zone in which other countries might seek to strangle its potential. Bismarck’s solution, writes political scientist David Edelstein, was to manipulate European time horizons—to dull perceptions of a long-term German threat by positioning Berlin as an honest broker in Europe’s myriad short-term crises.³⁶ China, too, pursued a time-based strategy during the 1990s and 2000s—keeping Washington focused on the near-term benefits of economic and diplomatic cooperation, to buy time in which to develop the long-term power potential to reach for dominance in East Asia and beyond.

A grasp of the strategic importance of time is essential today. Understanding how U.S. rivals perceive time—whether they think their own geopolitical windows are opening or closing—can provide clues regarding how aggressively they will act. If Russia believes that it has only limited time before crippling demographic and economic problems make their effects felt, if it worries that time is not on its side but on Washington’s side, then Moscow may take greater risks to achieve its geopolitical goals while it can still do so. Likewise, understanding how U.S. adversaries use time as a weapon is critical to responding effectively. China clearly seeks to convince its neighbors that the United States will one day retrench from the Asia-Pacific region, leaving Beijing dominant.³⁷ Initiatives that demonstrate enduring American commitment—developing new military access agreements, stationing additional assets forward, deepening U.S. involvement in

Understanding how rivals perceive time can provide clues regarding how aggressively they will act.

regional diplomacy and economics—can thus help defeat China’s strategy in addition to providing other benefits.

Knowing the Competition

Imposing costs, exploiting asymmetries, and understanding time horizons are tasks not easily performed, however, so an eighth principle is that *competing effectively requires knowing your competition intimately*. Only by understanding a competitor’s worldview, decision making, and behavioral proclivities can one outmaneuver that competitor; only by grasping a rival’s weaknesses and fears can one exploit them. Such understanding, in turn, requires sustained intellectual and economic investment.

During the Cold War, the United States’ strategy was rooted in what historian David Engerman terms an unprecedented “U.S. intellectual mobilization” to develop expertise on the Soviet Union. That mobilization involved individuals inside and outside of government, was underwritten by massive government investments, and produced a rich—if hardly infallible—expertise on all things Soviet.³⁸ More broadly, U.S. strategy rested on deep insights about the Soviet system. Kennan’s original diagnosis of Soviet behavior flowed from his knowledge of the interplay of Russian history and Soviet ideology; his prescription of containment flowed from his awareness of Moscow’s weaknesses and his understanding that the Kremlin was an aggressive but patient adversary.³⁹ In the 1970s and 1980s, the shift to a more aggressive cost-imposing strategy was driven by an understanding of how deficient and badly strained the Soviet economy was, and how targeted investments in high-tech capabilities could exploit those vulnerabilities.⁴⁰

Today, there are ample possibilities for better understanding the “official minds” of U.S. competitors. Many of China’s key doctrinal writings—on military matters, political warfare, and other issues—are openly available to those who can read the language.⁴¹ In capable hands, they provide extraordinary insight into the ambitions, fears, and behavior of the Chinese regime. But despite these insights, and although the situation is gradually improving, the United States does not have anywhere near the same intellectual capital in dealing with Russia or China—two competitors that each have their own distinctive history, aims, and methods—that it once developed in dealing with the Soviets.⁴²

The reasons for this deficit are numerous—the natural atrophy of the United States’ Russia expertise after the Cold War, the diversion of attention and resources to the Middle East after 9/11, declining federal investment in area studies and international studies programs, among others.⁴³ Yet the cumulative effect has been strategically debilitating: It has made more elusive the granular

knowledge of the adversary on which the best strategies rest. The resource and time investments needed to remedy that deficit are undoubtedly significant. But if long-term competition requires getting inside the head of the opponent, the costs of foregoing that investment may be much higher.

Looking Forward and Backward

Equally important is *an institutionalized capability to look forward as well as backward*. No contest with a sentient rival can ever be fully scripted, but long-term strategy does demand looking over the horizon and considering the course of coming events. Doing so entails some systematic consideration of one's long-term goals and plans, an adversary's likely intentions and responses, and the exogenous factors (demographic trends, economic changes) that might influence the competition. Long-term competition therefore places a premium on planning, not to predict the future, but to prepare oneself for what it may hold.

Yet long-term competition also places a premium on looking backward—on assessing performance to date and shifting course as necessary. “Because strategic interaction involves a contest of adversary wills,” writes one analyst, “It is rarely sufficient for one side or the other simply to choose a path and then stick to it until it has reached its goal. Unless the opponent is completely outmatched or virtually inert, [its] reactions, countermoves, and initiatives will almost always call for adjustments and sometimes entirely new approaches.”⁴⁴

Britain's eventual triumph in the Napoleonic wars required such adaptation. Prior to 1808, London relied on its longstanding strategy for defeating European rivals, which focused on bankrolling continental allies in Europe while using naval power to suppress French trade and harass French forces in secondary theaters. Against a Napoleonic juggernaut that generated unprecedented military power, this strategy repeatedly failed. After 1808, British leaders changed course: deploying an army to the continent to drain French resources and ultimately help defeat Napoleon in battle; opening new markets to replace those shuttered by the Continental System; and defusing tensions with coalition partners Russia and Sweden. The contrast with Napoleon's failure to adjust—his tendency to plunge ever deeper into new wars of conquest in an effort to solve problems created by old ones—was notable.⁴⁵

The key, of course, is to institutionalize capabilities for planning and reassessment so that they occur before disaster strikes. Over the course of the Cold War, the U.S. government utilized—albeit somewhat inconsistently—an array of such mechanisms: the drafting of NSC-68 in 1950, Eisenhower's Solarium planning exercise on U.S. strategy in 1953, the Nixon-Kissinger reports on American foreign policy in the early 1970s, the comprehensive net assessments of the

military and geopolitical balance conducted by the Carter administration in the late 1970s, and others. More recently, there have been myriad proposals to improve systematic planning and reassessment.⁴⁶

In the end, the precise mechanism may ultimately be less important than the basic commitment to take these tasks seriously: to create structures and processes within which planning and reassessment regularly occur, to connect those processes to policy formulation and budgeting in a systematic way, and to make both prospective and retrospective thinking more than an afterthought for harried officials who must deal with short-term crises while still positioning the country for long-term success.

Strengthening the System

In multiple respects, then, long-term competition is a test of statecraft. Yet *long-term competition is also a test of systems—it is a measure of whose political, social, and economic model can better generate and employ power on the international stage.*

This being the case, the cardinal sin of competitive strategy is to take steps that weaken the sinews of a nation's underlying power. The United States largely avoided this error during World War II and the Cold War: It resisted the temptation to create a "garrison state" that might have mobilized more resources in the short-term but destroyed the liberal, free-market foundations of U.S. strength in the process. "We could lick the whole world if we adopt the system of Adolf Hitler," Dwight Eisenhower once commented, but that victory would be Pyrrhic in multiple respects.⁴⁷ Yet even some of the greatest powers in history have ignored this basic principle. As historian Paul Kennedy writes, imperial Spain ultimately stumbled because it neglected "the importance of preserving the economic underpinnings of a powerful military machine."

The expulsion of the Jews, and later the Moriscos; the closing of contacts with foreign universities; the government directive that the Biscayan shipyards should concentrate upon large warships to the near exclusion of smaller, more useful trading vessels; the sale of monopolies which restricted trade; the heavy taxes upon wool exports, which made them noncompetitive in foreign markets; the *internal* customs barriers between the various Spanish kingdoms, which hurt commerce and drove up prices—these were just some of the ill-considered decisions which, in the long-term, seriously affected Spain's capacity to carry out the great military role which it had allocated to itself in European (and extra-European) affairs.⁴⁸

If the parallels seem obvious, that is because the United States presently is considering or pursuing similarly ill-conceived measures: restrictions on immigration that will undermine economic competitiveness and long-term demographic health, insufficient investment in education at all levels, declining government funding for basic scientific research, and self-defeating tariffs and trade restrictions.

Rather than walking this perilous path, U.S. officials should heed another lesson of past competitions: that protracted rivalries can provide a catalyst to strengthen the American system. During the Cold War, the federal government threw its weight behind desegregation because doing so was seen as a diplomatic necessity in the global ideological contest with Moscow.⁴⁹ The exigencies of that contest also spurred the United States to make unprecedented peacetime investments in transportation infrastructure, higher education, and basic research—all of which made the United States a sharper competitor over time. In the past, Washington took protracted geopolitical struggles as an opportunity to live up to its highest ideals and build a stronger society. It should do the same today.

Setting the Right Pace

All of the foregoing relates to the need for vigorous, open-ended competition against U.S. rivals—for embracing what George Kennan called “the perpetual rhythm of struggle.”⁵⁰ Yet as Kennan’s comment also implies, these competitions are marathons, not sprints, and so an eleventh principle is that *excelling in long-term competition requires pacing oneself*.

The story of great powers which overreach—and end up with disastrous overstretch—is as old as great-power competition itself. In the Peloponnesian War, the Athenians began their slide toward defeat when they committed half of their military to a disastrous campaign in Sicily, even as their Persian enemies were camped nearby at Athens’ gates.⁵¹ Napoleon might have mastered much of Europe had he not been so determined to subdue all of it. The Soviet Union worked itself into fatal geopolitical overextension in the 1970s by taking on new commitments and provoking intensified strategic competition just as it was reaching the limits of its power.

As these examples illustrate, long-term competition places a high value on restraining oneself as well as restraining one’s enemies. It requires setting priorities: determining where one will compete most vigorously and where one will husband limited resources and energy, as the British did in retrenching from East Asia as well as the Western Hemisphere in the late nineteenth century to concentrate on meeting the rising German threat closer to home.⁵² It requires knowing when to stop: understanding when the further projection of power actually leads to weakness by dissipating resources and creating vulnerabilities. It can sometimes

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require utilizing more economical—and imperfect—forms of competition, as the Eisenhower administration did during the 1950s in substituting the threat of general nuclear retaliation for a more conventional defense.⁵³ It can even require tactical retrenchment from time to time—withdrawing from exposed positions and assuming a more defensible posture, as the United States did after its own experience with overstretch in Vietnam.

These things are easy to say and hard to do: Adversaries often expand into spaces left undefended; non-vital interests may no longer seem non-vital when they are attacked, as the classic example of the Korean War demonstrates. More fundamentally, the line between robust competition and hubristic overreach is always clearer in hindsight than in foresight. Yet a basic awareness of the need to pace oneself is critical, if only because unsustainable strategies are doomed for failure.⁵⁴

Competition, Not Confrontation

Long-term competition is thus an undertaking that demands a degree of grim determination and discipline; it entails outmaneuvering, deterring, and coercing an adversary. Yet as the United States wages protracted geopolitical struggles, it is also worth remembering a final principle: *competition and confrontation are not synonymous*. Embarking upon long-term competition does entail a willingness to run certain risks and accept higher tensions in key relationships. Competition, however, does not inevitably imply a spiral into outright conflict, it does not necessitate abandoning diplomacy, and it can actually reduce the chances of war.

The U.S. rivalry with Great Britain lasted for nearly a century after the War of 1812, yet Washington and London still undertook tacit cooperation to enforce the Monroe Doctrine, while also striking formal and informal bargains to manage the risk of war along the Canadian frontier.⁵⁵ During the Cold War, Washington and Moscow collaborated on issues such as nuclear nonproliferation and smallpox eradication; they established mechanisms—the crisis hotline, bilateral summits, arms control agreements—to keep communications open and tensions under control. As historian John Maurer has argued, in fact, some U.S. policymakers viewed the arms control negotiations of the 1960s and 1970s as a useful competitive tool, because they slowed Moscow's progress in the arms race until the United States was better positioned to respond.⁵⁶

The Cold War also illustrates something more fundamental: that long-term competition can be an alternative rather than a stimulant to military conflict. The thrust of Kennan's X article, after all, was that the United States need not fight a third world war to stymie Soviet expansionism. If Washington held the line and maintained its strength, the Kremlin would shrink from provoking a

showdown and the Cold War might ultimately be brought to a peaceful—and successful—conclusion. Containment, writes historian John Gaddis, was a path between unacceptable extremes—between a strategy of appeasement that would have had disastrous consequences and a nuclear war that could have been even more cataclysmic.⁵⁷

A similar logic applies today. Competing effectively is central to preventing the deterioration of U.S. influence and interests in the face of the Russian and Chinese challenges. Yet it is equally a way of convincing officials in Moscow and Beijing that the United States can hold its own, and thereby discourage those powers from pursuing ever bolder strategies of revisionism. As during the Cold War, Washington should avoid backing its rivals into corners; it should preserve lines of communication and create off-ramps for de-escalation. But it must also demonstrate that efforts to erode the international system will not pay. “If you want peace, prepare for war,” the old saying goes. Preserving the peace today will likely mean getting serious about long-term competition.

Long-term competition can be an alternative not a stimulant to military conflict.

Conclusion

Turning principles into practice is never easy, and there is no single formula for turning these 12 principles into a winning approach to long-term competition. Indeed, the particular policies that Washington pursues against Russia—an aggressive but declining power—will likely differ from those it pursues vis-à-vis China—a more subtle and more formidable competitor with a longer time horizon. Yet principles do nonetheless precede practice, and it is hard to imagine the United States competing effectively with either country unless it gets the basics right. American officials have now recognized that the exceptional period after the Cold War is over, and that intense, ongoing geopolitical struggle is once again the norm. Now the United States must regain the initiative—and the advantage—in these struggles by acting upon the fundamental principles of long-term competition.

Notes

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3. For examples of this view, see Aaron Friedberg, "Competing with China," *Survival* 60, no. 3 (June–July 2018): 7–64; *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>; Alina Polyakova and Spencer Boyer, *The Future of Political Warfare: Russia, the West, and the Coming Age of Global Digital Competition*, Brookings Institution, March 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/fp_20180316_future_political_warfare.pdf; David Shlapak and Michael Johnson, "Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics," RAND Corporation, 2016, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html.
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6. Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: Norton, 1987), 378.
7. See, for example, Kurt Campbell and Ely Ratner, "The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations," *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 2 (March/April 2018): 60–70.
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9. For a good discussion of Athenian strategy, see John Lewis Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy* (New York: Penguin, 2018), chapter 2.
10. Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 37–38, 77–79; A.W. Marshall, *Long-Term Competition with the Soviets: A Framework for Strategic Analysis* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1972).
11. See Robert Blackwill and Jennifer Harris, *War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017); Thomas Mahnken, Ross Babbage, and Toshi Yoshihara, *Countering Comprehensive Coercion: Competitive Strategies Against Authoritarian Political Warfare* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2018); Luis Simon, "The 'Third' U.S. Offset Strategy and Europe's 'Anti-Access' Challenge," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 39, no. 3 (May 2016): 417–445.
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14. Thomas Mahnken, *Cost-Imposing Strategies: A Brief Primer* (Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2014), 10-11; Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment*, 78–88.
15. Eric Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.-China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power 1996-2017* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015).

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20. Carrie Gracie, "China's Xi Jinping Opens 'New Era' For Country and the World," *BBC*, October 25, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-41744675>; Hal Brands, "Democracy vs Authoritarianism: How Ideology Shapes Great-Power Conflict," *Survival* 60, no. 5 (October–November 2018): 61–114.
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22. See, for instance, Odd Arne Westad, "Has a New Cold War Really Begun?" *Foreign Affairs*, March 27, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-03-27/has-new-cold-war-really-begun>; Dmitri Trenin, *Should We Fear Russia?* (London: Polity, 2016); and Michael Lind, "Cold War II," *National Review*, May 10, 2018. <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2018/05/28/us-china-relations-cold-war-ii/>.
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29. Campbell and Ratner, "China Reckoning," 69–70.
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