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Averting Major Power War

The Logic of Mutual Assured Survival

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CONTENTS

- 1 Introduction
- 4 Understanding the Risk of Major Power Conflict
- 8 Pathways to War
- 11 Escalation Dynamics
- 13 Strategies for Peace
- 19 Collective Coexistence Through Mutual Assured Survival
- 25 Getting From Here to There: Recommendations for U.S. Policy
- 28 Conclusion

- 29 *Endnotes*
- 35 *Acknowledgments*
- 36 *About the Author*

INTRODUCTION

No two major powers have openly fought one another in over three-quarters of a century—an unprecedented length of time often referred to as the Great Power Peace or Long Peace.¹ Until recently, there was every reason to expect this era would continue indefinitely. Some observers even ventured that great power rivalry—and, by extension, great power war—had become a relic of the past.² Few if any do so today.³ Since at least 2008, strategic competition among the major nuclear-armed powers—the United States, China, India, and Russia—has steadily intensified in various arenas and across several regions of the world. Now, following Russia’s shocking invasion of Ukraine in 2022, as well as China’s increasingly belligerent actions toward Taiwan, the possibility of a major power clash has become all too plausible. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, the official National Security Strategy of the United States declared that “the risk of conflict between major powers is increasing.”⁴

The imperative to avert such a conflict cannot be overstated. A major power war has the potential to become a catastrophe of world-historical proportions. While much would depend on the duration of such a clash, whether it remained confined to a specific region, and most crucially, stayed below the nuclear threshold, the scale of death and destruction could very possibly be of an unprecedented magnitude. Hundreds of thousands and potentially millions of people could die.⁵ Vast areas of the zone of conflict would be laid to waste. The shock and disruption to the global economy of even a limited clash would also be immense and probably prolonged given how tightly intertwined trade and investment have become from decades of globalization. No country would be spared. And should such a war become global and unlimited in scope,

the harm to the planet and the very existence of life would be imperiled, potentially irredeemably.

Among the major powers, the United States is arguably the most exposed to the risk of becoming embroiled in a war with another major power. Given its unrivaled set of security commitments that span the globe and, more generally, its role as the principal defender of the current “rules-based international order,” the United States is more predisposed than any other power to use force to resist territorial aggression, uphold established rules and norms of international behavior, and maintain open access to the “global commons”—essentially, the high seas, outer space, and cyberspace. Those commitments increase the likelihood that the United States could find itself fighting either China or Russia—and conceivably both at the same given their growing security ties. No other power stands to lose more should a major power war result in defeat and, with it, the potential demise of the global order the United States has worked so hard to build and nurture over many decades. All this assumes, of course, that humanity survives a conflagration of this magnitude.

The Joe Biden administration—following its predecessor—has adopted what is essentially a “peace through strength” strategy to deter and defeat potential Chinese and Russian aggression through the maintenance of countervailing military power in coalition with like-minded partners around the world.⁶ This strategy has attracted broad bipartisan support, no doubt because many policymakers view it as having succeeded in keeping the peace during the Cold War.⁷

American power and resolve were crucial to the eventual triumph of the West during the Cold War. But it came at a high price: an extraordinary amount of national resources were expended on developing weapons and keeping forces at high levels of readiness to maintain mutual deterrence over the course of more than four decades. The human costs incurred fighting numerous proxy conflicts across the globe were also significant. As the current U.S. strategy has taken shape, however, there has been remarkably little reflection on the experience of the Cold War—in particular, whether adopting similar policies today could have comparable consequences in the future.⁸ The lack of such forethought is all the more egregious given there are good reasons to be concerned that the new era of major power rivalry will have attributes that make it more dangerous than the U.S.-Soviet confrontation.

Even if the worst excesses and extreme dangers of the Cold War era can be avoided, there is still the question of how the major powers will cooperate on a range of pressing threats to humanity—not least

the accelerating effects of climate change, the possibility of pandemics deadlier than COVID-19, and the emergence of malignant forms of artificial intelligence—while relations between them grow more hostile. This dilemma too has not received the attention it deserves. The presumption seems to be that common interest will transcend mutual mistrust allowing cooperation to proceed without hindrance on a parallel track. The historical record, however, is not encouraging that this will be so straightforward. And to the extent there are precedents for cooperation between strategic rivals, they arguably do not match the level and scope of what is now required.

For all these reasons the United States needs to rethink its current approach to averting major power conflict. Nurturing a condition of collective coexistence among the major powers through a deliberate process of mutual reassurance and reciprocated restraint, best described as “mutual assured survival,” offers a better approach. In addition to fostering a more stable and less costly relationship among the major powers, such a strategy would help generate the essential strategic trust necessary to tackle shared global challenges.

Given the acrimonious state of relations between the United States and both China and Russia, the prospect that all three would spontaneously embrace the logic of mutual assured survival is not promising. The future course of their rivalry, however, is not preordained and decades of hostile confrontation should not now be viewed as inevitable; the U.S.-Soviet confrontation certainly did not follow a linear path. Although the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 dramatically transformed the Cold War into a worldwide militarized confrontation—much like Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and China’s actions toward Taiwan threaten to do today—the die was not cast by it.⁹ Historical research has revealed that a real opportunity existed to shape a different, less confrontational U.S.-Soviet relationship after General Secretary Joseph Stalin died in 1953, which, for a variety of reasons, never materialized.¹⁰ Similar opportunities could present themselves in the future. The United States (and China and Russia) should be prepared to recognize what will likely be fleeting openings for change, if and when they arrive. In the meantime, other practical steps can still be taken to lessen the risk of war.

UNDERSTANDING THE RISK OF MAJOR POWER CONFLICT

Scholars who assess the prospect of armed conflict typically weigh a collection of “risk factors” that have been empirically linked to either elevate or lessen the likelihood of war.¹¹ An initial review of these variables suggest that the new era of great power competition could become more dangerous than the Cold War.

First, the Cold War is often characterized as primarily a two-sided, bipolar confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, though other nuclear-armed powers were clearly involved. Scholars consider such rivalries to be inherently more stable than multisided contests: the latter typically have more points of friction (and thus potential confrontation) and latitude for rivals to maneuver and align against each other in ways that could be destabilizing.¹² By this reasoning, today’s multipolar rivalry promises to be more dynamic as the United States, China, India, and Russia each jockey for an advantage.¹³ Two of them, for example, confront more than one potential adversary—the United States with China and Russia (conceivably allied together) and China against the United States and India (also potentially as partners).¹⁴

Second, during the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union viewed each other as peer rivals—certainly militarily if not economically. While each at times harbored insecurities about their relative global standing, neither feared being eclipsed as a world power by the other. The fear, therefore, that one of them would act more aggressively against the other either to arrest its decline or, alternatively, exploit a moment of superiority to secure a decisive global advantage, was not a prevailing factor.¹⁵

By comparison, the relative standing of today’s major powers could undergo significant change over the next two to three decades, conceivably engendering destabilizing insecurities.¹⁶ Observers of global

affairs, for example, have long expected China to overtake the United States economically, which would give it the wherewithal to develop a more powerful military that it could employ to secure hegemony over East Asia and potentially beyond.¹⁷ Other analysts, however, worry about a different scenario, one in which China's economic growth peaks around midcentury and declines thereafter because its society is less open and innovative and its population will become more elderly and less productive.¹⁸ Besides falling behind the United States, China could also be overtaken economically by India, with its more youthful population, by the end of this century.¹⁹ Both prospects could conceivably cause China's leadership to take advantage of its brief period of ascendancy to lock in geopolitical gains through military action. Finally, Russia's global standing is also likely to shift significantly over the same period. Even before the latest round of economic sanctions brought on by its aggression toward Ukraine, Russia was facing the prospect of falling even further behind China and the West, with unpredictable consequences for its foreign and security policies.²⁰

Third, the risk of dangerous interactions between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War was arguably tempered by their geographic separation. Although U.S. and Soviet forces often operated in close proximity, this mostly occurred either at sea or at considerable distances from their respective homelands. Localized incidents and interactions were therefore less likely to be viewed as immediately threatening. This is no longer likely to be the case.²¹ In Europe, the opportunity for U.S. armed forces to operate closer to Russia's borders has grown considerably due to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) enlargement. Only two NATO member states with permanent U.S. military bases or access arrangements (Norway

and Turkey) shared a land border with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Today, while Turkey does not border Russia, four new alliance members (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland) do.²² Furthermore, if Finland and Sweden join NATO, as now seems inevitable, Russia will face yet more potentially hostile forces close to its territory. In the Western Pacific, U.S. forces also now routinely operate in the East China and South China Seas, parts of which China claims to be within its sovereign jurisdiction. The frequency of U.S. intelligence flights and military exercises in the vicinity of China's borders is also increasing after having declined following the normalization of relations in the 1970s and 1980s. Finally, the current major powers can, with little warning, now inflict near-instantaneous harm through cyberattacks, which was not the case during the Cold War.

Fourth, unlike in the Cold War, several of the major powers are now involved, either directly or indirectly, in territorial disputes with one another, which have historically been a leading risk factor for conflict among rival powers.²³ The most openly contentious are along the China-India border, which has recently witnessed a growing number of deadly clashes.²⁴ Concurrently, China continues to assert what it believes to be its sovereign rights to large parts of adjacent maritime areas in the Western Pacific, including the Taiwan Strait.²⁵ The United States, along with several of its allies, actively contest those claims through so-called freedom of navigation naval operations that periodically cause friction.²⁶ Furthermore, two U.S. allies—Japan and the Philippines—are separately involved in militarized territorial disputes with China in the East China and South China Seas, respectively.²⁷ Two formal allies of China also have hostile relationships with countries the United States considers close or emerging security partners—North Korea with South Korea and Pakistan with India. Additionally, in Europe, the United States and its NATO partners are actively aiding Ukraine in resisting Russian aggression, which has the clear potential to spill over into neighboring countries, triggering a wider war.²⁸

Fifth, during the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union reached a variety of formal and informal agreements that helped moderate their rivalry and reduce the risk of dangerous misunderstandings.²⁹ Those included respect for each other's post-World War II spheres of influence, noninterference in each other's domestic politics, and the acceptance of mutual transparency with the advent of satellite reconnaissance systems and other national technical means that provided reassurance about military intentions and facilitated the verification of important arms control agreements. Only a few of those

agreements remain relevant to the new era of major power rivalry. Much of the arms control regime created during the Cold War, especially in its waning years, has been dismantled and involved only the United States and Russia. This includes the Antiballistic Missile Treaty, the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and the Treaty on Open Skies.

Although this risk assessment is not promising, the incentives for the major powers to avoid war remain no less strong than they were during the Cold War. Given that the consequences of such a conflict would be catastrophic for all, it is commonly asserted that a major power war would occur only as a consequence of “miscalculation” or “misunderstanding” and “inadvertent escalation.” What those terms mean or, put differently, how they translate into plausible scenarios whereby two or more major powers become embroiled in an armed conflict that neither desire, is rarely elaborated.³⁰ Any strategy for averting a major power war should logically lessen the risk of not just premeditated aggression but also various unintended pathways to war; as such, it needs to be discussed in greater detail.

PATHWAYS TO WAR

When considering specific pathways to major power war, it is helpful to distinguish between the initial triggering events that precipitate a confrontation and the dynamics that could then propel those directly involved to the brink of war. With regard to the former, three kinds of contingencies can be identified as plausible crisis-triggering scenarios: revisionist, catalytic, and accidental.

REVISIONIST CONTINGENCIES

Revisionist contingencies derive from actions taken by a major power to deliberately alter the status quo in its favor or, alternatively, to preempt what it fears could be comparable intentions of a rival. Examples include altering a national boundary, seizing physical control of disputed territory, engaging in a maritime blockade or quarantine, and moving forces into a blocking position designed to impede access to a particular area. Whatever the motivation, the revisionist power calculates that it can achieve its objective without precipitating a serious confrontation because it believes—rightly or wrongly—it has certain advantages that will dissuade a response. For example, such a power could believe that a clear asymmetry of interests is at stake or that it enjoys a local operational advantage such as geographical proximity. The revisionist power could also calculate that its putative adversary is consumed or distracted by another problem—foreign or domestic—and thus less inclined to respond forcefully.

Those incentives to act could be further strengthened if the revisionist power believes it can achieve a *fait accompli* that the opposing power would view as too difficult or costly to reverse, thus dissuading it from even trying. Alternatively, it could choose to pursue its objective

in a relatively slow and incremental fashion deliberately designed to lessen the likelihood of triggering serious pushback before the objective is achieved. Often referred to as “salami tactics,” both China and Russia have employed them in recent years to change the status quo in the South China Sea and North Caucasus, respectively. In both cases, China and Russia have employed so-called hybrid or grey-zone warfare, which can involve engaging in cyberattacks; spreading disinformation; and using unconventional or paramilitary forces to confuse, disrupt, and otherwise undermine organized resistance.³¹

Carefully calculated actions of this kind, however, are not risk free, as the target state could respond differently than anticipated. For example, it cannot be assumed with any certainty whether another power will react forcefully to transgressions of declared red lines. The successful employment of grey-zone tactics in one instance will not necessarily yield the same results in another, even given similar circumstances. The target state could be less surprised and better prepared to respond or could simply have resolved to react more strongly.

CATALYTIC CONTINGENCIES

Catalytic contingencies arise from actions by third parties that trigger the involvement of the major powers. In this scenario, several major powers have allies or security partners that are involved in territorial disputes with another power or one of its own partners. This increases the risk that a relatively low-level incident could initiate a chain reaction leading to a larger conflict. Such a scenario could include a clash between China and Vietnam, India and Pakistan, Iran and Israel, North and South Korea, and Russia and a neighboring state, especially a

member of NATO. Taiwan could also decide that the time is ripe to assert its desire for full independence, triggering an armed response from China that eventually precipitates a confrontation with the United States. North Korea's domestic situation could suddenly deteriorate, producing widespread political unrest, which could in turn trigger external intervention and a similar crisis involving the United States and China (and even conceivably Russia, given its proximity).

Actions by nonstate actors could also trigger a dangerous crisis among the major powers. A Pakistan-based terrorist group, for example, could carry out a deadly attack on India, resulting in Indian-military retaliation and eventual Chinese involvement (given its security commitments to Pakistan). Cyberhackers, with or without the support of Chinese or Russian authorities, could carry out a highly destructive attack against the United States (or one of its allies) that prompts comparable retaliation. Whether the harm caused by the initial attack was intended or simply an unanticipated byproduct is largely irrelevant. Other scenarios involving nonstate actors and weapons of mass destruction are also conceivable.

ACCIDENTAL CONTINGENCIES

The third type of triggering contingency derives from an accident or other unintended incident that involves—either initially or eventually—the major powers. For example, a cyber-intrusion or covert operation intended to be discreet and relatively inoffensive could go awry and cause more disruption than intended. Weapons tests—such as a missile launch or an anti-satellite experiment in space—that malfunction and cause serious damage or accidents involving nuclear weapons are also possible triggering events. So too are false warnings of attack and other unwarranted alarms.³² Such incidents occurred with some regularity during the Cold War, and, while they never led to conflict, such an outcome cannot be excluded from happening in the future. Military rivals, furthermore, will often probe each other's defenses and participate in close-proximity maneuvers to test reactions and commitments. The propensity for such incidents to cause a serious confrontation depends to a large extent on circumstances; if they are isolated or take place when relations are reasonably stable, the risk of escalation is quite low. The converse, however, is also true.

ESCALATION DYNAMICS

Once triggered, a confrontational situation between two or more major powers could then escalate in ways that none of them anticipated and certainly never desired. In general, international crises are managed under conditions of considerable uncertainty about their proximate causes and relevant parties' motives. Accurate and timely information about what is happening on the ground could also be limited or delayed.³³ Furthermore, for reasons discussed earlier, decisions regarding responses will often have to be made quickly and sometimes under considerable psychological and physical duress depending on the stakes involved.³⁴ Time-zone differences and the pressure of concurrent events can compound the stress through prolonged sleep deprivation and exhaustion. Such conditions are obviously not conducive to careful deliberation and sound reasoning.³⁵ Many studies have demonstrated how decision-making in such circumstances can be flawed and driven more by emotional impulses such as fear, anger, or hubris than by a clear and dispassionate assessment of the prudent thing to do.³⁶

Rivals that have stumbled into a crisis are not just more inclined to assume the worst about their adversary's intentions but are also driven by a zero-sum mentality wherein interests are defended and goals pursued "not in terms of one's own value satisfaction, but in terms of what the gaining or loss will mean to one's competitor."³⁷ Such thinking can encourage brinkmanship when one side believes—rightly or wrongly—that it enjoys a situational advantage or feels it can exploit what it perceives to be a greater aversion to risk on the part of its adversary. This could manifest itself, for example, in the employment of aggressive tactics to intimidate one's rival into backing down or making concessions. The same mentality also makes rivals less predisposed to seek compromise or show restraint in contentious situations for fear such behavior

could be construed as a sign of weakness, or worse, a strategic defeat. Further escalation could appear more attractive than climbing down.³⁸

Once tensions begin to ratchet up and using force becomes either overtly or implicitly threatened, the crisis enters its most dangerous phase. Precautionary defensive measures—such as alerting forces and readying them for the possibility of combat operations—can be misconstrued as being precursors to offensive action. Intelligence-gathering operations to divine what an adversary is planning could also be perceived in a similar fashion. And if forces are deployed to show resolve or support a specific measure in a crisis, the risk of accidents and dangerous interactions involving opposing forces increases.

At some point, one of the contestants could come to believe that conflict is inevitable and that clear advantages exist to initiating hostilities first. They could calculate, for example, that they can secure their interests with fewer costs if they take the initiative or, conversely, that they are less likely to succeed or will suffer greater losses if they do not. Such reasoning could influence decision-making in contexts ranging from relatively local and discrete confrontations to larger, more consequential ones where national leaders legitimately worry about an imminent attack on their homeland.

Advances in military technology have compounded the risk that decision-makers in acute crisis situations could find the resort to force more compelling. Specifically, the growing capacity of armed forces around the world to conduct discrete long-range strikes using either cyberweapons, drones, or highly accurate conventional armed missiles has clearly increased the latitude to use force in ways deemed to be low cost and low risk. When both adversaries have such capabilities, the danger that one will decide to use them first rather than risk being immediately disadvantaged also increases. Those capabilities include strikes designed to paralyze an opponent's early-warning and communication capabilities—its so-called central nervous system—to lessen the likelihood of effective retaliation. Many of those capabilities can simultaneously be used for limited tactical purposes and in support of more consequential strategic missions, thus adding to the risks of misunderstanding and inadvertent escalation.

STRATEGIES FOR PEACE

Since the Donald Trump administration first openly acknowledged the new era of great power competition in 2017, the United States has actively pursued a peace through strength strategy designed to deter China and Russia from engaging in revisionist behavior by bolstering U.S. military capabilities to convince both powers that aggression would neither succeed nor go unpunished.³⁹ This strategy, which the Biden administration has continued and expanded, involves upgrading the United States' national defenses—most notably its cyberwar-fighting capabilities, strategic nuclear deterrent forces, and ballistic missile defense systems—as well as bolstering the security of U.S. allies and partners around the world through renewed declaratory commitments and forward-deployed forces.⁴⁰

Adopting the core elements of the United States' Cold War strategy to avert war with either China or Russia is certainly compelling given its apparent track record of keeping the peace for such a prolonged period. The challenge ahead, however, could grow more daunting. Unlike the Cold War, the United States faces the prospect of having to deter two major power adversaries from engaging in revisionist behavior. China is clearly also a more formidable rival in comparison to the Soviet Union. As strategic partners, China and Russia could also work much closer together in the future to thwart U.S. deterrent efforts. Furthermore, judging by India's nonaligned posture during the ongoing Ukraine war, the United States cannot assume that it will act as a helpful counterweight to China or Russia in the future, certainly to the extent that some American observers might have hoped.

Calibrating how much military capability the United States will need to deter China and Russia is not a straightforward task, therefore.

Too little could undermine the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments, whereas too much could be provocative and potentially drive China and Russia closer together, not to mention stimulate costly arms competitions with both simultaneously.⁴¹ The United States is an immensely rich country, but for the foreseeable future it needs to manage high levels of national indebtedness and also meet many growing domestic demands to stay globally competitive. Relying on allies to help counter both China and Russia also presents its own set of dilemmas. The United States needs to reassure its allies and partners that the country will honor its security commitments without emboldening them to do things that are destabilizing and dangerous. But doing too much could encourage them to free ride on U.S. military spending without pulling their weight. Meanwhile, maintaining forward-deployed forces at elevated levels of combat readiness through regular and realistic training is generally seen as the best way to convey the seriousness of U.S. commitments, but such activities can be provocative to potential adversaries and increase the risk of dangerous interactions and inadvertent escalation.

As relations among the major powers increasingly revert to Cold War levels of mutual mistrust and acrimony, the inherent dilemmas of a peace through strength strategy will likely grow more acute. The Biden administration recognizes this challenge and has signaled its desire for what is sometimes referred to as a condition of “responsible competition” with China and “stable and predictable relations” with Russia.⁴² This encompasses negotiated arms constraints and various kinds of crisis prevention and management agreements (often referred to euphemistically as guardrails) to avoid accidental clashes and inadvertent escalation. The Biden administration has also repeatedly expressed its desire that cooperation among the major powers to manage various shared global problems not become hostage to their growing strategic rivalry.

The experience of the Cold War, however, is not encouraging that limits can be set on major power rivalry, or that meaningful cooperation can be pursued while mutual mistrust remains high. Although some arms control agreements proved beneficial (e.g., the Antiballistic Missile Treaty, which implicitly codified mutual assured destruction as the basis for strategic stability, and the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, which prohibited atmospheric explosions), for the most part, U.S.-Soviet negotiations proved ineffective in constraining strategic and tactical nuclear weapons or each side’s conventional arsenals. Only when the Cold War was winding down did real reductions become feasible. Given today’s

more complex, multisided strategic competition, negotiating formal arms control agreements is likely to be even more difficult. The same is also likely true for managing various common concerns. To the extent that progress was made on limiting nuclear proliferation, battling various diseases, and exploring outer space during the Cold War, it mostly only occurred during fleeting periods of rapprochement.

Given the likely consequences of a peace through strength strategy, exploring alternatives is clearly desirable. The two most commonly proposed can be termed “peace through restraint” and “peace through change.”

A peace through restraint strategy focuses less on influencing the calculus of potential adversaries and more on reducing the United States’ overall exposure to the risk of armed conflict with another major power. While the United States would continue to enhance its territorial security through improvements to, among other things, its cyber defenses and nuclear deterrent forces to ensure their capacities to execute devastating retaliation, it would progressively diminish the forward presence of its armed forces around the world, which has grown considerably since the end of the Cold War.⁴³ The United States would also, at minimum, resist any expansion of its current security commitments and military footprint. This includes no further enlargement of NATO (certainly not to include Ukraine) and no change to the United States’ present security obligations to Taiwan. Plans for closer defense ties with India that could entangle the United States in a conflict with China would also be curtailed. Additionally, the United States would support efforts by European NATO members, as well as the European Union, to take on more responsibility for their own security. The same applies to U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific.

To be clear, such a strategy would not constitute U.S. isolationism or disengagement from maintaining a global balance of power including resisting aggression should a major revisionist power threaten the world order. Much like nineteenth-century Great Britain, the United States would become an “offshore balancer,” projecting power globally to ensure free access to the global commons while remaining committed to resisting efforts by another major power to seek world hegemony. In many respects, this strategy also resembles what the United States did during the early twentieth century when it intervened in World War I and World War II to tip the scales in favor of the western allies. The United States would also remain active in maintaining important multilateral security regimes, especially those relating to nuclear nonproliferation. This approach, furthermore, would not preclude efforts to

lower tensions with China and Russia, which would lessen the risk of conflict and help facilitate cooperation on shared concerns.

Overall, a peace-through-restraint strategy seems an attractive strategic option. China and Russia could view the changed U.S. posture as less threatening to their security, which could incline them to reciprocate in a positive way, with benefits for cooperation in other vital areas. In principle, a relatively stable *modus vivendi* among the major powers could emerge as a result. The opposite, however, is also conceivable and, arguably, just as likely. Rather than reassuring China and Russia of benign U.S. intentions, unilateral U.S. restraint could signal American indifference or, worse, weakness that ultimately emboldens them to become even more aggressive and revisionist. U.S. allies and partners are also likely to question whether the United States remains committed to not just their security but also the United States' role as the principal defender of the present rules-based order. They could, consequently, decide either to “bandwagon” with China and Russia, or, alternatively, to adopt a more independent security posture that could also be unwelcomed. The latter, for example, could include acquiring a nuclear deterrent to compensate for what they consider a more uncertain U.S. security blanket. Such a response could completely unravel the international nonproliferation regime. Finally, U.S. retrenchment could weaken the decades-long effort to promote democracy and human rights around the world, of which the United States has been the principal champion. Over time, this could translate into a much more inhospitable global security environment for the United States.

The second alternative strategy—peace through change—rests on an entirely different approach to averting major power war. Instead of trying to lessen the risk of conflict, the goal would be to eliminate it entirely. This can be pursued in two ways. The first would entail a deliberate effort by the United States to end its rivalry with either China or Russia (and conceivably even with both powers). Historical precedents exist for such rapprochement: Great Britain choosing to settle differences with the United States in the Western Hemisphere at the end of the nineteenth century; Britain and France reconciling their differences prior to World War I to focus on the growing challenge from Wilhelmine Germany; the United States and China normalizing relations in the early 1970s; and China and Russia resolving their differences and becoming strategic partners in the aftermath of the Cold War.⁴⁴ Settling a divisive territorial dispute has been a common foundation on which rivals build trust and unwind their posture of mutual hostility. Often, formal political declarations designed to move on from the past

and lay out beneficial expectations for the future accompany initiatives to transform and ultimately end a strategic rivalry. Such steps will frequently pave the way for more material changes, including rescinding commercial restrictions, reducing military preparations for war, and initiating cooperative ventures.

A calculated effort by the United States to fundamentally transform its relationship with China or Russia could have been possible in the aftermath of the Cold War, but it now seems highly improbable given the hardening of attitudes, especially as political differences are increasingly defined as ideologically irreconcilable. Although China and Russia have at times indicated their desire for an arrangement with the United States that would respect each other's so-called core or legitimate national security interests (including privileged influence in bordering areas), with the implication that this would reduce friction and promote peaceful coexistence, such proposals have never gained traction.⁴⁵ Grander schemes for a new concert of powers based on, at minimum, tacit recognition of spheres of influence and mutual noninterference appear even less likely to succeed.⁴⁶ The only conceivable impetus for a comparable collective effort among the major powers would be the emergence of an especially acute common threat—for example, a deadlier pandemic or a sudden, catastrophic increase in the pace of climate change—that creates irresistible public pressure for them to put their mistrust aside and cooperate. However, as the recent COVID-19 pandemic suggests, the situation would likely have to be particularly dire and compelling for this to occur.

In contrast to this type of peace through change, the United States could instead embark on an intentionally coercive strategy to pressure its rivals economically, militarily, and, most important, politically such that they choose to bow out from further competition and, better still, undergo fundamental internal change. Only when China and Russia have become democratically governed states, so the argument goes, will the risk of conflict with either be truly eliminated.⁴⁷

Such thinking surfaced from time to time during the Cold War, with critics of U.S. containment strategy contending that the policy was too passive and did not do enough to weaken Soviet control over Eastern Europe or, for that matter, promote democratic change in Moscow. Only when the Ronald Reagan administration exerted intense pressure in the early 1980s, it is argued, did such change occur, allowing the United States to eventually triumph in the Cold War. Unsurprisingly, some commentators now advocate that the United States adopt comparable tactics against China and Russia with the ultimate goal of winning

a second Cold War. To many observers, former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo appeared to call for just such policies in the final months of the Trump administration.⁴⁸

Putting aside whether the Reagan administration's policies actually accomplished what has been attributed to them—the evidence is hardly dispositive—the efficacy and wisdom of this kind of coerced peace through change strategy are anything but clear. China, if not Russia, represents a far more formidable and resilient power than the Soviet Union.⁴⁹ Economic pressure tactics will be hard and costly to sustain. Executing such a policy would also require coordinating among many U.S. allies. Some, if not all, U.S. partners are likely to be uncomfortable with such an approach and would refuse to comply. Such tactics, moreover, could perversely reinforce the control wielded by autocrats in China and Russia, prolonging their longevity. The global economy is also now much more complex than it was in the twentieth century, making a concerted international effort to pressure China and Russia even more difficult than pursuing containment policies during the Cold War. Pivotaly, both powers will view such policies as acutely hostile, causing tensions to rise along with the risk of armed conflict. The prospects of fashioning cooperative responses to common problems would consequently also dim.

With none of these alternative strategies offering a wholly satisfactory way to reduce the risk of conflict, a different approach is needed—one that reconciles competing U.S. security imperatives. More specifically, the United States should aim to deter revisionist powers like China and Russia but in a way that avoids signaling hostile intent and triggering a costly arms competition as well as other potentially destabilizing behavior. It needs to find a way to reduce the risk posed by current and potential regional conflicts without undermining confidence in U.S. security commitments or disincentivizing its allies and partners from doing their fair share. And it needs to maintain the readiness of its armed forces and those of its allies without increasing the danger of accidental or unintended conflicts. All of this, furthermore, needs to be accomplished in a way that does not compromise cooperation among the major powers to manage shared global challenges.

COLLECTIVE COEXISTENCE THROUGH MUTUAL ASSURED SURVIVAL

Finding an alternative strategy to lessen the risk of major power conflict needs to begin by accepting that the United States' national security and ultimately its survival in the face of this and other existential threats to humanity cannot be achieved alone. The three main strategies for peace all place primary emphasis on self-help policy options when it is clear that reducing the likelihood of miscalculation and unintended conflict—whether triggered by revisionist behavior, the catalytic actions of others, or accidental events—requires some level of reassurance and restraint between putative adversaries. Recognition that international security and survival are inextricably entwined became increasingly widespread in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis, which in turn helped propel several important agreements especially affecting Europe. The focus at that time was understandably on lessening the danger of nuclear war whereas today the reality encompasses a much broader set of existential threats, all of which require collective international action if they are to be mitigated in a meaningful way.

For these reasons, the United States should promote collective coexistence as the objective condition that the major powers should aspire to create and maintain.⁵⁰ Achieving collective coexistence requires that each great power adopt a deliberate process of mutual reassurance and reciprocated restraint best described as mutual assured survival.⁵¹ This effort can begin between two rivals, but the underlying logic and guiding principles clearly have broad application. Indeed, this would be preferable.

In its idealized form, pursuing collective coexistence through mutual assured survival involves three complementary efforts designed to reinforce each power's sense of existential security, minimize the risk of dangerous crises and unintended escalation, and facilitate progress on

managing common threats to humanity. These efforts can be formalized through deliberate negotiations, but informal arrangements could be more practical in some cases.

REINFORCE EXISTENTIAL SECURITY

For as long as the major powers remain fearful that they can be intimidated, coerced, and ultimately attacked by a rival in ways that not just undermine their security and political independence but ultimately threaten their very existence as sovereign states, the risk of dangerous crisis incidents and interactions will remain significant. Their willingness to cooperate with one another in other endeavors will also be heavily circumscribed.

Such fears can be alleviated by declarations of goodwill and regular recommitments to the cardinal principles of international behavior—most notably, mutual respect for national sovereignty, self-determination, noninterference, and the peaceful resolution of international disputes. But such pronouncements are essentially vacuous without tangible complementary measures. What matters most is desisting from actions that can be construed as existentially threatening. These include political measures designed to challenge or subvert the legitimacy and control of state authorities including inciting and mobilizing public sentiment against another power (domestically and in third-party countries), economic actions intended to undermine the provision of essential goods and services, and conducting threatening military deployments and exercises in the vicinity of state borders and disputed areas. Adding to this list in recent years is cyber interference of critical military and civil infrastructure, particularly vital national command centers and networks, power grids, health facilities, and financial networks.

By far the most important existential security concern to the major powers, however, is the safety and continued viability of their nuclear deterrent systems on which they ultimately depend to dissuade coercion and attack. Strategic stability rests on each of the major powers retaining confidence in their ability to retaliate with devastating effect even if attacked first. Again, declaratory commitments such as the famous 1985 Ronald Reagan-Mikhail Gorbachev pronouncement that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought,” which President Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin repeated in 2021, are not without political value, but require that the major powers take additional steps to demonstrate that they mean what they say. This includes

being transparent about nuclear doctrine and operational practices that underscore the core purpose of those deterrent forces, as well as conveying the importance of safety precautions against accidental or unauthorized use. If needed, technical expertise and support could be shared to enhance mutual confidence in nuclear weapons security.

Ultimately, however, each power would need to signal and demonstrate its commitment to mutual nuclear deterrence, and more specifically, the sanctity of second-strike retaliatory forces. The development, testing, and deployment of capabilities that suggest otherwise—in other words, the acquisition of an offensive capacity to carry out a disarming strike with impunity—should be demonstrably restrained. This includes the further development of anti-satellite weapons capable of disabling critical strategic command-and-control systems; the deployment of comprehensive ballistic missile defense systems that could potentially blunt retaliation especially if used in conjunction with offensive strikes; deliberate interference and simulated attacks on national early-warning systems and command-and-control networks, particularly those involving cyberweapons; aggressive or intrusive activities in the vicinity of sea-based nuclear retaliatory forces; and obstruction or interference with national technical means, such as satellite surveillance systems and other monitoring devices.

BOLSTER CRISIS PREVENTION AND RESILIENCY

Although it is unlikely that the major powers can resolve their most contentious flashpoints diplomatically anytime soon, some points of friction can at least be rendered less dangerous. This includes, most obviously, Taiwan, the East China Sea and South China Sea, the China-India border, the Korean Peninsula, and areas immediately adjacent to Russia. Again, rules of responsible behavior can be enunciated for each major powers to observe, including regular commitments to the basic principles enshrined in the UN Charter against unilateral changes to the status quo and that any international differences or disputes be resolved peacefully. Establishing clear protocols to avoid unintended clashes and dedicated communication channels to resolve crises speedily should they arise helps buttress such commitments. Being transparent about military activities in sensitive areas, including prior notification of exercises and tests, is also crucial for signaling benign intent. In this context, major powers would be required to refrain from deploying forces and weapons systems that have the conspicuous potential to change the status quo in the vicinity of disputed areas.

Many if not all weapons systems have both defensive and offensive capabilities; thus, some ambiguity over their intended purposes will always exist. Nevertheless, some weapons are more suitable for defending physical space than seizing it, indicating that their core purpose is to deter changes to the status quo by nullifying rather than punishing aggression.

Despite a concerted effort to avoid serious crises, they will, in all likelihood, continue to arise from time to time. Here, again, the potential for dangerous escalation can be mitigated through various initiatives, including ensuring there are dedicated and reliable communication channels as well as agreed-upon protocols to reduce the possibility of misunderstandings.⁵² The overarching goal should be to ensure the resiliency of crisis management systems and reduce the likelihood of catastrophic failure. Various initiatives to improve how multilateral institutions like the United Nations respond to regional conflicts in a timely and effective manner would also be desirable.

FACILITATE MANAGEMENT OF COMMON THREATS TO HUMANITY

As major power rivalry intensifies, ongoing international efforts to manage a variety of serious global concerns are likely to be increasingly hindered by geopolitical tensions and related domestic political pressures. The failure to manage the coronavirus pandemic in an effective manner from the outset can be considered a harbinger in this respect. The risk, moreover, that progress on specific issues will be linked to the resolution of unrelated differences between the major powers will grow. Such transactional posturing has already emerged in negotiations between the United States and China over climate change.⁵³ Likewise, the workings of the United Nations and other multilateral institutions are already becoming obstructed by great power politics as occurred on numerous occasions during the Cold War.

Such posturing and politicking will be difficult to avoid altogether but can be minimized. In the interests of making progress on tackling problems for the common good, the major powers can agree on some basic ground rules to facilitate such efforts. The first would be to “ring fence” or “silo” international negotiations to the extent possible and refrain from engaging in linkage politics.⁵⁴ Second, discussions should be conducted in a way that avoids grandstanding or shaming behavior, including harnessing domestic and international media for this purpose, whatever the temptation could be to do so. Specific

concerns about irresponsible behavior or noncompliance should be taken up in a discreet fashion and conceivably through third-party intermediaries. Third, drawing attention to possible concessions or compromises that could cause discomfit internationally or domestically for a rival power just to score points should also be avoided. Although formal agreements with airtight language are always preferable, informal arrangements that help break logjams and create momentum are better than none. Finally, when it comes to the management of conflicts in multilateral settings, the major powers should agree at a minimum to not let their differences impede the provision of humanitarian assistance to affected communities.⁵⁵ Besides alleviating human distress, such actions would help maintain the credibility and functionality of vital international institutions.

Promoting collective coexistence among the major powers would likely face three main objections: (1) it is naive and, like earlier efforts at détente during the Cold War, it will not succeed; (2) it will undermine U.S. deterrence, particularly American security guarantees to allies; and (3) it will undercut efforts to promote democracy and human rights.

In response to the first, there have been many instances when the great powers have taken deliberate steps to lessen tensions and reduce the risk of conflict. Some of those lasted for many decades.⁵⁶ That some did not last so long does not obviate trying to be more successful in the future just as past failures to dissuade adversaries from engaging in aggressive behavior does not invalidate the practice of deterrence. The period of U.S.-Soviet détente had some notable achievements but ultimately failed because not enough was done to address existential concerns and constrain competition in peripheral regions, something that the broader conception of collective coexistence aims to address.

As for the second objection, mutual assured survival would not prevent the United States from continuing to invest in its own national defenses or those of its allies to deter aggressive Chinese or Russian behavior. This should be pursued in a way, however, that emphasizes deterrence by denial rather than punishment: the former lessens the scope of dangerous misunderstandings about intentions, especially in sensitive areas.

Finally, some critics will argue that promoting collective coexistence will give China and Russia greater license to pursue oppressive domestic policies at odds with democratic values and human rights. While the United States should eschew providing active assistance to individuals and groups that resist government-led oppression or

pursue secessionist policies, nothing under a peace through coexistence strategy prevents Washington from publicly criticizing activities it finds offensive and raising them with relevant government authorities and international bodies. Nor does it preclude U.S. sanctions against individuals and entities associated with such abuses or the denial of unfettered travel and access to the international financial system outside their borders. Finally, the United States would not shrink from promoting and supporting open political and economic systems around the world or competing against autocratic powers for influence in international bodies.

GETTING FROM HERE TO THERE: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

Establishing a relationship of collective coexistence through mutual assured survival will ultimately hinge on whether each power would find such a relationship to be more beneficial to its overall security and well-being than the prospect of unbridled strategic rivalry. There are good reasons to believe each would. At a minimum, the risk of a catastrophic war erupting that would do great harm not just to those directly involved but also to those on the sidelines would be lessened. So too would the prospect of costly competitive behavior in a variety of arenas at a time when each power has many pressing domestic priorities to attend to. Finally, progress on managing other existential threats to humanity is more likely to proceed in an expeditious manner if the major powers can reach a basic *modus vivendi* that moderates mutual mistrust and rivalry.

Regardless of these compelling arguments for collective coexistence, the poor state of relations among the major powers makes it highly unlikely that it can be pursued any time soon. The United States is presently engaged in a deadly proxy military conflict against Russia in Ukraine that shows no signs of abating—to the contrary, in fact. At the same time, U.S. relations with China are at their lowest level in decades principally because of differences over Taiwan but also because of a broad set of concerns including protectionist trade practices and Chinese aspirations to dominate the development of newly emerging technologies. Certainly, a comprehensive reset of great power relations of the kind that typically only occurs in the aftermath of a major war is hard to imagine.

The task in the short term, therefore, should be to prevent the risk of major power war from increasing further. With regard to Russia, President Biden and senior U.S. officials should continue to emphasize their desire to avoid escalation of the conflict in Ukraine and

accordingly calibrate the nature of the military assistance provided. U.S. military deployments and activities on Russia's periphery should reinforce that message. At the same time, the Biden administration should express its desire for a speedy end to the fighting but only on terms that are acceptable to the Ukrainian government. The prospect of dramatically improved U.S.-Russian relations, including relief from sanctions, should also be presented to the Russian people. Similarly, U.S. officials should continue to emphasize the desirability of reopening military-to-military channels of communication that have withered in recent years, resuming New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) arms control discussions, and continuing cooperation in other areas such as space exploration.

Much the same approach can be pursued with China. U.S. officials should avoid the rancorous exchanges that characterized early meetings with Chinese officials while deemphasizing political and ideological characterizations of China that could suggest disrespect for its leadership and system of governance. Continued U.S. adherence to the long-standing One China policy should be reiterated while private efforts that could inflame tensions unnecessarily over Taiwan should be actively discouraged. Likewise, military operations by U.S. and allied forces in the vicinity of Taiwan and, more generally, along China's vicinity that could be considered provocative, should also be curbed if there are indications that Chinese forces will show comparable restraint. As with Russia, the United States should continue to advocate for more regular and substantive dialogue, particularly between senior military and defense officials.

At the same time, the United States needs to prepare for the worst. Extensive contingency planning undoubtedly already exists for many of the crisis scenarios outlined above that could lead to an armed clash between the United States and another major power. There could still be gaps, however, that ought to be filled as soon as possible. Regardless, all contingency plans need careful review by so-called red teams to reduce the risk of unintended escalation. Similarly, military rules of engagement in certain situations—especially sensitive, conflict-prone areas—ought to be appraised in the same way for the same reason. Likewise, the emergency crisis channels that exist at various chain of command levels should be regularly tested to ensure they reliably function as intended. As many officials have admitted, crisis simulations and exercises designed to prepare them for the real thing are invaluable. Given how busy senior officials are, these practices are often difficult to organize and execute; nevertheless, finding time to hold such exercises

on a regular basis is essential. These measures are not substitutes for serious and sustained diplomacy, but they can help bound the risks until a more propitious moment arrives.

At some point in the future, if the experience of the Cold War offers any precedent, the opportunity to set relations on a more positive trajectory is likely to arise. One such opportunity could surface with the potential conclusion of the war in Ukraine. Depending on the circumstances, the possibility for a larger agreement on Europe's future security order could present itself—indeed, some scholars argue that a robust and acceptable settlement for all parties directly involved cannot be achieved without a comprehensive overhaul of the entire set of arrangements affecting peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic region, particularly those involving the European Union, NATO, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. A leadership change in Moscow could provide another impetus for such discussions, as it did in the 1980s with Gorbachev's tenure and could have in the 1950s following Stalin's death. And, just as the near-death experience of the Cuban Missile Crisis galvanized both U.S. and Soviet leaders to ratchet back tensions and reach a more stable *modus vivendi*, so too could a serious crisis in the South China Sea or Taiwan Strait involving U.S. and Chinese forces trigger something similar in Washington and Beijing.

The United States should be prepared to grasp such moments, if and when they arise, and explore the potential for improved relations. Much will depend on the nature of the opportunity, but there are many ways and avenues to convey an openness to positive change. The United States' military posture and the tempo of operations can also be recalibrated to reinforce such messaging. The same also applies to activities in the economic and commercial sphere. Allies and partners can likewise be encouraged to support such efforts. Whatever the menu of measures that are adopted, however, they will need to be carefully coordinated otherwise the central objective can be undermined by unclear or contradictory signals from home and abroad.

CONCLUSION

There is no guarantee that China and Russia will be receptive to American overtures for a long-term relationship of collective coexistence. This should not be viewed, however, as a fruitless effort. Indeed, it could yield important benefits in gaining the continued support of allies and partners, not to mention countries in the Global South, who will likely want to be reassured that the United States made a good faith effort to lessen the risks of major power conflict. Furthermore, a Chinese or Russian rebuff should not be interpreted as forever invalidating the feasibility of collective coexistence. Other opportunities to improve matters could arise and thus the United States should avoid assuming the worst and reacting in ways that make it more difficult to moderate major power rivalry in the future. The rivalry between the major powers will in all likelihood be a protracted one, and the United States has to take the long view.

ENDNOTES

1. The term “Great Power Peace” was coined by Jonathan Knight in “The Great Power Peace: The United States and the Soviet Union Since 1945,” *Diplomatic History* 6, no. 2 (April 1982): 169–84. John Lewis Gaddis popularized the “Long Peace.” See John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries Into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968). Some question how peaceful relations between the great powers were during this period. Soviet pilots fought in the Korean War, as did Chinese “volunteers.” China and India also clashed in 1960, while China and the Soviet Union skirmished along their border in 1969. The Korean War, however, was a proxy conflict for the Soviet Union, and China arguably did not constitute a major—certainly not nuclear-armed—power at the time. The same also applies to China and India in 1960. The deadly Sino-Soviet border clashes of 1969 had the potential to grow into something more serious, but they remained sporadic and limited.
2. See John Mueller, “War Has Almost Ceased to Exist: An Assessment,” *Political Science Quarterly* 124, no. 2 (2009); and Bruno Tertrais, “The Demise of Ares: The End of War as We Know It?,” *The Washington Quarterly* 35, no.3 (2012).
3. The conventional wisdom is that the United States is now in a new Cold War, or “Cold War 2.0,” with China and Russia. Some scholars go further. Russia expert Fiona Hill has described the war in Ukraine as “a great power conflict, the third great power conflict in the European space in little over a century.” Quoted in Maura Reynolds, “Fiona Hill: Elon Musk Is Transmitting a Message for Putin,” *Politico Magazine*, October 17, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/10/17/fiona-hill-putin-war-00061894>.
4. See White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: White House, 2022): 7, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.
5. See Niall Ferguson, “All is Not Quiet on the Eastern Front,” Bloomberg News, January 1, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2023-01-01/victory-over-russia-in-ukraine-may-bring-world-war-3-niall-ferguson>.
6. See White House, *National Security Strategy*, 7.
7. See Ronald O’Rourke, *Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense—Issues for Congress*, CRS Report R43838 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2022), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43838/93>.

8. Some scholars have tried to stimulate public discussion. See Hal Brands and John Lewis Gaddis, "The New Cold War: America, China and the Echoes of History," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2021); Li Chen and Odd Arne Westad, "Can Cold War History Prevent U.S.-Chinese Calamity? Learning the Right Lessons From the Past," *Foreign Affairs*, November 29, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-11-29/can-cold-war-history-prevent-us-china-calamity>; and Robert Litwak, "Russia's Nuclear Threats Recast Cold War Dangers: The 'Delicate Balance of Terror' Revisited," The Wilson Center, May 3, 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/russias-nuclear-threats-recast-cold-war-dangers-delicate-balance-terror-revisited>.
9. See Gordon S. Barrass, *The Great Cold War: A Journey Through the Hall of Mirrors* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009): 71–2; and Robert Jervis, "The Impact of the Korean War on the Cold War," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 24, no. 4 (December 1980).
10. See Melvyn P. Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007): 84-150; and Geoffrey Roberts, *A Chance for Peace? The Soviet Campaign to End the Cold War, 1953-1955* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2008), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/chance-for-peace-the-soviet-campaign-to-end-the-cold-war-1953-1955>.
11. For more on the methodology of conflict risk assessment see Paul B. Stares, *Preventive Engagement: How the United States Can Avoid War, Stay Strong, and Keep the Peace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).
12. For a brief distillation of the debate among international relations scholars regarding the relationship between structural characteristics of the international system, particularly the distribution of power among major powers and the risk of conflict, see Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, *Causes of War* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010): 32–4.
13. On this general argument see, in particular, John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001): 338–47; 394–411.
14. China and Russia are led by autocrats with seemingly unchecked authority to decide their countries' fate. In these circumstances, decision-making is more likely driven by personal traits and individual biases than when it relies on a collective, deliberative process. The latter does not preclude groupthink and other biases that can produce poor outcomes, but it makes them less likely.
15. The Sino-Soviet rivalry in the late 1960s, however, did exhibit such threat perceptions.
16. U.S. Department of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2022), <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-national-defense-strategy-npr-mdr.pdf>.
17. See Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); and Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011); and Bonny Lin and Joel Wuthnow, "The Weakness Behind China's Strong Façade: Xi's Reach Exceeds His Military's Grasp," *Foreign Affairs*, November 10, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/weakness-behind-china-strong-facade>.
18. See, for example, Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); and Ryan Hass, *Stronger:*

Adapting America's China Strategy in an Age of Competitive Interdependence (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).

19. See Peter Drysdale and Charlie Barnes, "How India Can Realise Its Ambitions to Become a Great Power," *East Asia Forum*, August 7, 2022, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/08/07/how-india-can-realise-its-ambitions-to-become-a-great-power>.
20. See Andrei Kolesnikov and Denis Volkov, "The Coming Deluge: Russia's Looming Lost Decade of Unpaid Bills and Economic Stagnation," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 24, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/11/24/coming-deluge-russia-s-looming-lost-decade-of-unpaid-bills-and-economic-stagnation-pub-85852>; V. F. Nitsevich et al., "Why Russia Cannot Become the Country of Prosperity," *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* 272 (2019), 032148, doi:10.1088/1755-1315/272/3/032148; and Apurva Sanghi et al., *Russia: Recession and Growth Under the Shadow of a Pandemic*, Russia Economic Report 43 (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2020), <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/34219/Russia-Recession-and-Growth-Under-the-Shadow-of-a-Pandemic.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y>.
21. It was no accident that two of the most dangerous confrontations of the Cold War—the 1963 Cuban Missile Crisis and the 1969 Sino-Soviet border clash—occurred on or close to the national territory of the principal contestants. Similarly, the deadliest aerial incidents during the Cold War—various reconnaissance missions close to or over the Soviet Union that were shot down, as well as the Korean Air Lines Flight 007 incident—occurred in similarly sensitive areas.
22. Turkey does not share a land border with Russia, though two relatively new NATO countries (in addition to Turkey) share the Black Sea as littoral countries with Russia.
23. See Kalevi J. Holsti, *Peace and War: Armed Conflicts and International Order, 1648–1989* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991); and Paul K. Huth, *Standing Your Ground: Territorial Disputes and International Conflict* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).
24. See Alyssa Ayres, "The China-India Border Dispute: What to Know," Council on Foreign Relations, June 18, 2020, <http://cfr.org/in-brief/china-india-border-dispute-what-know>. China has evidently also made incursions into Bhutan, which has a close security relationship with India. See Robert Barnett, "China Is Building Entire Villages in Another Country's Territory," *Foreign Policy*, May 7, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/07/china-bhutan-border-villages-security-forces>.
25. See Drysdale and Barnes.
26. See Ronald O'Rourke, *U.S.-China Strategic Competition in South and East China Seas: Background and Issues for Congress*, CRS Report R42784 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2022), <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42784.pdf>.
27. See "South China Sea," International Crisis Group, last accessed November 29, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/south-china-sea>.
28. See Thomas Graham, *Preventing a Wider European Conflict*, Contingency Planning Memorandum no. 28 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2022), <https://www.cfr.org/report/preventing-wider-european-conflict>.
29. On informal or tacit rules see Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995): 203–5; Gaddis, *The*

Long Peace; and John J. Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War,” *International Security* 15, no. 1 (1990): 26–7.

30. For a useful exception to this observation see Timothy R. Heath, Kristen Gunness, and Tristan Finazzo, *The Return of Great Power War: Scenarios of Systemic Conflict Between the United States and China* (Santa Monica, CA, RAND Corporation, 2022).
31. For a discussion of these terms and the different ways they are used, see Frank G. Hoffman, “Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges,” *PRISM* 7, no. 4 (November 2018); and Donald Stoker and Craig Whiteside, “Blurred Lines: Gray-Zone Conflict and Hybrid War—Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking,” *Naval War College Review* 73, no. 1 (Winter 2020).
32. See Daryl G. Kimball, “Nuclear False Warnings and the Risk of Catastrophe,” Arms Control Association, last modified March 16, 2020, <http://armscontrol.org/act/2019-12/focus/nuclear-false-warnings-risk-catastrophe>.
33. The growing ability to “manufacture reality” with so-called deep fake technologies will only exacerbate the level of uncertainty for decision-makers. For an overview of these technologies, see Siwei Lyu, “Deepfakes and the New AI-Generated Fake Media Creation-Detection Arms Race,” *Scientific American*, July 20, 2020, <http://scientificamerican.com/article/detecting-deepfakes1>.
34. The amount of time that leaders have to make potentially critical decisions in response to threatening activities has become even more compressed in recent years. Whereas the flight time of intercontinental missiles provided at least some time for national leaders to respond, cyber interference against strategically important infrastructure and critical defense systems can occur near instantaneously. The advent of artificial intelligence and even faster data processing techniques could lessen this challenge in the future at the cost of potentially ceding control to autonomous systems capable of responding in the time demanded. Whether this will make the world safer or more dangerous is not self-evident.
35. See Alexander L. George (ed.), *Avoiding War: Problems of Crisis Management* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991): 559–60.
36. For example, see Ron Carucci, “Stress Leads to Bad Decisions. Here’s How to Avoid Them,” *Harvard Business Review*, August 29, 2017, <http://hbr.org/2017/08/stress-leads-to-bad-decisions-heres-how-to-avoid-them>; and Anne Trafton, “Stress Can Lead to Risky Decisions: Neuroscientists Find Chronic Stress Skews Decisions Toward Higher-Risk Options,” *Massachusetts Institute of Technology News*, November 16, 2017, <https://news.mit.edu/2017/stress-can-lead-risky-decisions-1116>.
37. See John A. Vasquez, *The War Puzzle Revisited* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 79.
38. For a review of literature on crisis brinkmanship, particularly in crises involving nuclear weapons states, see Mark S. Bell and Julia Macdonald, “How to Think About Nuclear Crises,” *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 2 (February 2019).
39. See White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, 2017), <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.
40. See O’Rourke, *Great Power Competition*.

41. See Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978); and Shiping Tang, "The Security Dilemma: A Conceptual Analysis," *Security Studies* 18, no. 3 (2009): 587–623.
42. See Jim Garamone, "Competition Remains Defining Feature of U.S.-China Relations, but Communications Still Important," U.S. Department of Defense, November 22, 2022. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3225557/competition-remains-defining-feature-of-us-china-relations-but-communications-s>.
43. See Jonathan Stevenson, "Chapter One: Oversees Bases and U.S. Strategic Posture," *Oversees Bases and U.S. Strategy: Optimizing America's Military Footprint* (Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, 2022).
44. See Karen Rasler, William R. Thompson, and Sumit Ganguly, *How Rivalries End* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).
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46. See, for example, Richard N. Haass and Charles A. Kupchan, "The New Concert of Powers: How to Prevent Catastrophe and Promote Stability in a Multipolar World," *Foreign Affairs*, March 23, 2021, <http://foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2021-03-23/new-concert-powers>; and Sandy Gordon, "Finding the Balance Between India and China in the Asian 'Concert of Powers,'" *Conversation*, October 17, 2011, <http://theconversation.com/finding-the-balance-between-india-and-china-in-the-asian-concert-of-powers-3646>. For discussion on the original Concert of Europe and its potential lessons for today, see Kyle Lascuertes, *The Concert of Europe and Great-Power Governance Today* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), http://rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE200/PE226/RAND_PE226.pdf.
47. This belief rests on the so-called Democratic Peace Theory that posits that democracies do not go to war with each other. See Michael W. Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1983): 205–35; Michael W. Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs, Part 2," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 12, no. 4 (Fall 1983): 323–53; David A. Lake, "Powerful Pacifists: Democratic States and War," *American Political Science Review* 86, no. 1 (1992): 24–37, doi:10.2307/1964013; and Spencer R. Weart, *Never at War: Why Democracies Will not Fight One Another* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).
48. See Matthew Choi, "Pompeo: U.S. Engagement With China Has Failed," *Politico Magazine*, July 23, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/23/pompeo-china-speech-nixon-380251>.

49. See James Dobbins, Howard J. Shatz, and Ali Wyne, *Russia Is a Rogue, not a Peer; China Is a Peer, not a Rogue* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 2019) <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE310.html>; and David Vergun, “Near-Peer Threats at Highest Point Since Cold War, DOD Official Says,” U.S. Department of Defense, March 10, 2020, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2107397/near-peer-threats-at-highest-point-since-cold-war-dod-official-says>.
50. The term “collective coexistence” is preferred to “peaceful coexistence” for several reasons. Besides the association of the latter with Soviet propaganda during the Cold War, future relations between the United States and Russia and China are unlikely to be truly peaceful in the sense that term is used to characterize America’s relationship with Canada, for example, or that between Germany and France. The modifier “collective” also implies the joint nature of the endeavor. Some experts also prefer the term “competitive coexistence,” especially in the context of U.S.-China relations, which is a commonly used in the field of evolutionary biology. See, for example, Peter Chesson, “A General Theory of Competitive Coexistence in Spatially-Varying Environments,” *Theoretical Population Biology*, 58, no.3 (November 2000). <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0040580900914862> and Andrew S. Ericksen, “Competitive Coexistence: An American Concept for Managing U.S.-China Relations,” *The National Interest*, January 19, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/competitive-coexistence-american-concept-managing-us-china-relations-42852>. Although this term has some superficial appeal in that it is intended to capture the unavoidably competitive nature of major power rivalry, collective coexistence is preferred because it infers that survival will requires a joint effort.
51. The term “mutual assured survival” has been used by others before but with a narrower meaning; for example, to advocate a shift from deterrence based on nuclear retaliation to one that relies on ballistic missile defenses. See B. Bova, “Replace MAD with Mutual Assured Survival,” *Science*, Vol.5 (1984). More recently, another author used the term in the context of preventing inadvertent escalation of limited conflict. See Travis Zahnow, “Mutually Assured Survival: Detering Inadvertent Conflict Escalation Through Strategic Restraint Signaling,” *InterService Journal*, no. 12 (2022): 110-23, <https://thesimonscenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/IAJ-12-2-pg110-123.pdf>
52. For an elaboration of this recommendation see Evan S. Madeiros, *Major Power Rivalry in East Asia*, Discussion Paper Series on Managing Global Disorder no.3 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2021): 31-2.
53. See “China says U.S. Must ‘take responsibility’ for breakdown in climate ties,” Reuters (November 4, 2022).
54. See Bruce Jones, *Major Power Rivalry and the Management of Global Threats*, Discussion Paper on Managing Global Disorder no.7 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2021): 14-6.
55. See Richard Gowan, *Major Power Rivalry and Multilateral Conflict Management*, Discussion Paper on Managing Global Disorder no.8 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2021): 26.
56. For a comprehensive analysis of periods of major power cooperation see Michael J. Mazaar, Samuel Charap, Abigail Casey, Irina Chindea, Christian Curriden, Alyssa Demus, Bryan Frederick, et al., *Stabilizing Great Power Rivalries*, The RAND Corporation (Santa Monica, CA, RAND Corporation, 2021).

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*Cover photo: Artillery is fired during a military drill
in Qingtongxia, Ningxia Autonomous Region, China
on September 25, 2017.
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