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Conflicts Of The Past As Lessons For The Present

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DETECTING RUSSIA AND CHINA

IN THIS ISSUE

RALPH PETERS • GORDON G. CHANG • JAKUB GRYGIEL

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The Decadence of Deterrence

By Ralph Peters

As these words are written, we await a single man's decision whether to plunge Europe's eastern marches into war. By the time you read this, blood—perhaps a great deal of it—may have been splashed across Ukraine's steppes. Euro-American powers have sought to discourage Vladimir Putin's latest aggression through the threat of economic sanctions coupled with the belated and stingy provision of military hardware to Ukraine. NATO, the primary instrument of collective Western influence, and the United States, Euro-America's self-doubting superpower, have publicly ruled out direct military action to oppose Russian aggression, pursuing "deterrence without risk."

Politically congenial, if strategically dubious, this approach cannot intimidate Putin, who continues to defy, with eminent success, our "accepted" rules for the comportment of governments on the international stage. If Putin chooses not to thrust his armored columns into Ukraine, it will not be due to our asthmatic huffing and puffing but because he has already achieved his interim goals—opaque to us—on his long march to rebuilding what he sincerely regards as Russia's rightful empire.

As the most-popular diplomatic dodge of our time, economic sanctions have an impeccable record of failure to deter war, genocide, or terrorism; or to bring rogue governments to heel. Economic sanctions do not deter, they merely annoy: Commoners suffer, but hostile elites party on. The primary function of economic sanctions is to allow us the comforting delusion that we have shown resolve while still behaving responsibly. Meanwhile, the oppression, aggression, nuclear-weapons research, and anti-democracy coups continue. Our tepid plays fail to deter while enabling bad actors to portray themselves as victims and play the nationalist, religious or ethnic-supremacist card with their beleaguered populations.

Throughout known history—and doubtless before the first stylus met wet clay—the only deterrence that has worked, albeit unevenly, has been deterrence through the credible threat of retributive violence. The word "deterrence" (from the Latin for "to frighten from") does not appear until 1788, but, for millennia, it was an active tool in search of a name. Throughout humanity's dastardly reign, collectives have sought to protect themselves from aggression through competitive strength of their own, or through alliances, or both. But, in the clinch, successful deterrence always relied on the credible threat of unbearable retaliation.

Of course, armed deterrence has not always worked—far from it. The whims of rulers, the delirium of populations, the calculations of upstarts and, always, befuddled miscalculations have kept history entertaining, if grim. Yet, deterrence-through-strength long remained the best hope for a state and society to live unmolested. Indeed, the greatest triumph of deterrence was quite recent: The mocked and maligned concept of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) did not prevent brushfire conflicts or even conventional wars, but the clearly understood existential and reciprocal threat from nuclear warfare allowed humanity to endure and prosper.



Image credit: Poster Collection, UK 2475, Hoover Institution Archives.

MAD remains a guarantor between great powers, but innovative military technologies threaten to erode the previously clear division between the effects of conventional weapons and nuclear arms. For national leaders and their governments, their potential vulnerability to precise targeting could, in the coming decades, revivify the strike-first mentality.

Meanwhile, deterrence appears increasingly essential and essentially impractical. In short, we have the power to deter, but not the will.

Successful deterrence relies upon three factors. First, it requires the means to inflict unacceptable pain on an aggressor. Second, it demands the firm and undoubted resolve to employ those means. Third, deterrence requires a rational interlocutor who can objectively weigh the consequences of his intended actions.

The first tenet could be met readily by the “West,” with its breathtaking wealth and military strength (at least, on paper). Even if they are not decisive, economic sanctions have, at times, served as a braking mechanism to buy time, and, if employed as part of a package with threatened physical coercion, could add to the calculus.

Our problems begin with the second requirement, the demand that we demonstrate and maintain the strength of will to back our ultimatums with real and timely consequences. Still well short of military force, our credibility suffers from our own reluctance to bear the mildest discomfort ourselves. Relying upon economic sanctions, we invariably water them down: Allies wish to minimize trade disruption; we don’t want to annoy human-rights activists or our own tax-dodging multinational corporations; and third parties raise a ruckus over access to resources, or simply flout our sanctions through layers of intermediary transactions. Yes, we outlaw business conducted through lesser foreign banks or arrest and prosecute middling individuals who subvert efforts, but rare is the capitulation of the sanctioned government.

Now our efforts at averting a disastrous war have been muddled by the NordStream2 pipeline project, a see-through Trojan horse embraced by German politicians and industrialists, even though Russia’s strategic purpose was obvious: bypassing old pipelines that crossed and thus empowered East and Central European states that had escaped Moscow’s force field. Greed is ever a salient characteristic of humankind, but German greed in this instance has reached mythic heights of selfishness and cynicism (not least, because of the immeasurable destruction inflicted on Ukraine by German troops within living memory).

Germany’s novice coalition government says many of the right things, but it mouths them with evident reluctance, as would a schoolboy forced to read a confession in front of his classmates. (Ever underestimated, Putin has played the long game with the Germans, hiring out-of-office German politicians, including a former chancellor, at absurdly high salaries to “work” in Russia’s energy sector.) We shall see if Putin moves and Germany sustains the NATO alliance or breaks it over a pipeline, but, in the meantime, we have gotten a lesson, yet again, about the dominance of German business interests over all else in Berlin’s de facto *Weltanschauung*. Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock of the Green Party had campaigned on a pledge to stand up to Vladimir Putin on human-rights grounds; however, since assuming office and facing Putin’s influence along the banks of the Spree, she has appeared much chastened, an Atlanticist who can’t swim. Europe’s nineteenth-century “German problem” is still with us, if in a charcoal-gray suit not a *Feldgrau* tunic.

If the West cannot halt a single pipeline to deter a brazen, savage war of conquest, we had best prepare for a very messy future.

Then there is that wild-card third factor, the need for a rational target audience for our deterrent warnings. Here, we defeat ourselves by clinging to our insistence that real and potential opponents not only will act rationally but that their psychology will conform to our culturally specific concept of rational behavior and abstract logic. But what appears self-evidently logical to us may seem naïve, or bizarre, or suspect to a strong-man in Beijing—to say nothing of a religious fanatic or a military strongman in Africa or, for that matter, a firebrand nationalist in the re-Balkanized Balkans.

Further crippling our efforts, our Ivy-League-deformed view of how diplomacy must work excludes the overpowering force of emotion in human affairs. We are, ultimately, ruled by the heart, not the head. Only a minority—a very small minority—of wars of aggression over the centuries were begun in an atmosphere of mathematical detachment. Indeed, the twentieth century may fairly be described as the “hysterical century” (although history provides plentiful competition for the title).

So . . . we have the means to deter (where deterrence is possible), but lack the commitment and resolve to use it. And even after our misadventures in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, in Somalia or in the “War on Terror,” we insist that every opponent’s logic must mirror our logic, despite abundant evidence to the contrary. How can we act effectively if we will not assess our enemies honestly and respond incisively?

As an aside, religious fanatics—the true believers—can never be deterred, only killed. Even nationalist violence may not be subject to deterrence. If Germany, once considered the most coldly analytical of nations, could commit cultural suicide by murdering its Jewish population and practical suicide by attacking inexhaustible powers with the Nazi regime’s limited means, how shall we believe that reason brings to bear an imperial force in human affairs?

Whether or not Putin moves to conquer more of Ukraine will, as noted above, depend upon Putin, not upon our frantic demarches. Faced with an increasingly disorderly world, advances in military technology, a society-rupturing misinformation revolution, and humanity’s gleeful appetite for malfeasance, deterrence is much needed but in near-terminal decay, decadent in its self-delusion and laughably self-righteous.

Might may not make right, but it can make a potential opponent think twice. Weakness, actual or perceived, is an invitation to bad behavior, in the schoolyard or in the Pripet Marshes.

Humanity’s natural impulse is to postpone pain, even if our evasion is sure to cause us greater pain in the future. Our wishful-thinking enfeeblement of the concept of deterrence all but guarantees future misery. With a brilliant monster on the hunt where Europe’s boundaries waver, we just want to have an undisturbed lunch.

Ultimately, there is no deterrence without risk, but there is nothing but risk in the absence of deterrence. We primly warn bullies that we might not share our candy with them tomorrow—so they take all the candy they can grab today.



RALPH PETERS is the author of thirty-four books, including works on strategy and security affairs, as well as best-selling, prize-winning novels. He has published more than a thousand columns, articles, and essays here and abroad. As a U.S. Army enlisted man and career officer, he served in infantry and military intelligence units before becoming a foreign area officer for the dying Soviet Union and the new Russia. As a soldier, journalist, and researcher, he has experience in more than seventy countries, covering various wars and trouble spots. His historical fiction won the American Library Association’s Boyd Award for Literary Excellence an unprecedented four times and also received the Herodotus Award and the Hammett Prize. Additionally, he was the 2015 recipient of the Goodpaster Award, presented each year to a distinguished American soldier-scholar. In 2017, he was selected for the U.S. Army’s Officer Candidate School Hall of Fame.



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“The Crescendo Moment”: Deterring Russia and China

By Gordon Chang

NPR’s Nick Schifrin reports that the Biden administration believes “Vladimir Putin has decided to invade Ukraine, and has communicated that decision to the Russian military.”

President Joe Biden implicitly highlighted the urgency of the situation on February 15 by delivering a speech that was, according to CNN’s Kaitlan Collins and Phil Mattingly, scheduled only a few hours beforehand. Biden’s comments, containing both warnings and assurances, were largely directed to Putin. The *New Yorker*’s Robin Wright, immediately after the remarks, called this “the Crescendo Moment.”

So how can America, at this late date, deter Russia?

There should be no surprise why the situation looks grave. Biden did not on February 15 remind Putin about the Budapest Memorandum, in which Washington and Moscow in December 1994 guaranteed Ukraine’s sovereignty and borders. On January 19, Biden admitted NATO might tolerate a “minor incursion.” He has ruled out military force. And as Arthur Waldron of the University of Pennsylvania told *Strategika*, “the Biden administration for months has been in appeasement-mode.”

Biden’s appeasement, unfortunately, is nothing new. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, American policy has been to support the Russian state. “Yes, there’s a new more assertive, maybe even more aggressive Russia, but fundamentally Russia is a state in decline,” said Douglas Lute in 2016, when he was America’s ambassador to NATO. “If you accept the premises that we’ve heard here about Russia’s internal weakness and perhaps steady decline and so forth, it may not make sense to push further now and maybe even—and maybe accelerate or destabilize that decline.”

Those sensible-sounding words have led to indulgent and misguided policies—fecklessness—and Putin, taking advantage of the situation, has been able to redraw the map of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus region with bluster, intimidation, subterfuge, and force.

“Remember the folks who brought us the Russian Reset?” Waldron asked. “They’re back in power, and they learned nothing the first time.” The foreign policy team that let Putin annex Crimea in 2014 and take over the Donbas is at it again. Putin is counting on continued feeble responses from the Atlantic Alliance.

It is in this context that Putin heard Biden’s most recent words. On the 12th of February, the American president told his Russian counterpart during their phone call that the U.S. and its allies and partners will

“respond decisively and impose swift and severe costs” if there is an invasion. On the 15th, Biden repeated the warning, outlining costs Russia would bear.

Unfortunately, as Waldron points out, Biden’s periodically issued threats “have so far been vague and unpersuasive.”

The solution for Biden is simple: become persuasive. Putin knows the power of the United States but undoubtedly thinks that, as Lute has intimated, America and NATO will do nothing to undermine the Russian state. Biden in his remarks on Tuesday made that clear, stating “We do not seek to destabilize Russia.”

The best way to deter the Russian strongman, however, is to immediately impose crippling sanctions and show him the U.S. is willing to see his regime fail.

Are severe sanctions risky? Of course, but three decades of misguided policy have left America and the West with only exceedingly dangerous options. If the history of 1930s Europe has taught us anything, it is that the failure of democracies to take resolute actions at an early stage only makes the situation worse. This is no time for nuance.

There is one more benefit from sanctioning Putin before he invades: China can be deterred from aggressive acts against neighbors, most notably Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines, and India.

Almost every analyst thinks that Beijing and Moscow are stronger because they have teamed up—on February 4 they announced their “no limits” partnership and declared that their tie-up is “superior” to an alliance—but the reverse could also be true. China may be easier to contain now that it has tied itself to the Kremlin.

How so? Russia is far weaker, and the disparity gives American policymakers an opportunity to make an example of the more vulnerable of the pair. Chinese ruler Xi Jinping, for all his appearance of strength, is unlikely to take on an America driving his partner into the ground.

For five decades, Washington policymakers thought that the strengthening of the Chinese Communist Party was in America’s interests. As China grew stronger, the reasoning went, Beijing would become a “responsible stakeholder” in the international system, as then Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick said in a now-infamous 2005 speech. Zoellick was applying Ambassador Lute’s generous approach to a rising state, not a declining one.

Applying this wrong view with ideological fervor, American policymakers continually ignored, forgave, and explained away unacceptable Chinese behavior, thereby empowering the most hostile elements in Beijing by showing everyone else that belligerence worked.

In short, America has supported aggressors and, unwittingly, encouraged aggression at both ends of the Eurasian landmass.

Ronald Reagan did not accept the 1970s Nixon-Kissinger consensus that the world had to live with the USSR and through determined policies engineered the end of Soviet communism. Americans then forgot this powerful lesson and supported two states that now threaten to take down the international order.

As Kabul was falling last August—thanks in part to China’s support to the Taliban—Beijing was pushing the point that the U.S. was incapable. The Communist Party’s *Global Times*, hours after the Taliban captured the Afghan capital, asked how could America stand up to mighty China when it could not even deal with insurgents. The semi-official tabloid also stated this, referring to the U.S.: “It cannot win a war anymore.”

Poll: How should the United States respond to aggressions against Ukraine and Taiwan?

- The United States should sell or provide offensive weapons to both nations to preserve their sovereignties.
- Both Ukraine and Taiwan deserve formal defense alliances with the United States to deter aggression.
- The United States has no business intruding into the affairs of either nuclear Russia or China.
- The United States needs to put both Ukraine and Taiwan formally under the U.S. nuclear umbrella.
- All the United States can do is impose economic sanctions on Russia or China if either attacks its neighbors.

Moreover, Chinese propaganda talked about Taiwan as Kabul fell. In an editorial, the *Global Times* said that once a war breaks out in the Taiwan Strait “the island’s defense will collapse in hours and the U.S. military won’t come to help.”

It is now time for Washington to reestablish deterrence, and the place to first do that is Ukraine.



GORDON G. CHANG is the author of *The Coming Collapse of China*, *Nuclear Showdown: North Korea Takes On the World*, and the recently released *The Great U.S.-China Tech War* and *Losing South Korea*. Chang lived and worked in China and Hong Kong for almost two decades. He is a columnist at *Newsweek* and *The Hill*. Chang has given briefings at the National Intelligence Council, the CIA, the State Department, U.S. Strategic Command, and the Pentagon. Chang frequently appears on CNN, Fox News Channel, Fox Business Network, Bloomberg, CNBC, MSNBC, and PBS. He is a regular co-host and guest on *The John Batchelor Show*. He served two terms as trustee of Cornell University.

How to Deter Russia and China

By Jakub Grygiel

Because of the nature and number of threats as well as the fraying reputation of the United States, the best hope to deter China and Russia is by empowering American frontline allies and partners. They—Taiwan and Ukraine in this particular case—are the first responders to any regional crisis and have the strongest incentives to counter their aggressive neighbors. They have to deter their enemies by denying them the ability to achieve quick victories at small costs.¹

The main role of the United States is to support these countries’ efforts to enhance their own military capabilities. Local defense by the locals is the best deterrent.

American commitments to Taiwan and Ukraine are of course different. While neither is an ally, the U.S. maintains a posture of “strategic ambiguity” toward Taiwan, suggesting but not guaranteeing that it would come to its defense if attacked by China. In Ukraine’s case, it is quite clear that there is no obligation and no will to engage in a direct war with Russia if Moscow decides to send its armored forces to, or even beyond, the Dnieper river. But in both cases the credibility of the United States—and thus of its powers of deterrence—are weak.

The most immediate reason for such weakness is the American reputation of chaos and ineffectiveness. Domestic political divisions and the “woke revolution” puzzle most foreigner observers and instill doubts about American staying power in our friends. Moreover, the 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan was badly mismanaged. Instead of conveying the idea that the U.S. is adjusting its priorities and concentrating all of its energies on China (and presumably on Russia), the withdrawal looked like a panicked escape with the resulting and tragic abandonment of our local allies. Suddenly, being a local ally of the United States appeared to be a risky proposition rather than a net benefit.

But there is also a broader, structural reason for the weakness of American deterrence—and the ensuing need for strengthening the military capabilities of the locals: we deter by punishment, while locals—Taiwan and Ukraine—deter by denial. Deterrence by punishment is based on the threat of retaliation after an attack occurs; the defender (the U.S.) threatens to hit the enemy hard where it hurts him the most, often on its territory, and such a threat should dissuade the attacker from initiating an offensive. Deterrence by denial promises the enemy that its objectives will be exceedingly difficult to achieve; the invasion will be a hard slog and the enemy will be denied the ability to achieve his goals. The latter is more effective in today’s circumstances.

With some simplification, the U.S. tends to deter by punishment because of the distance that separates the American continent from the likely location of hostility in Eurasia. The potential attack that the U.S. is trying to deter would happen against a state on Eurasia’s “rimlands” where the presence of American troops,



Image credit: Poster Collection, UK 2762, Hoover Institution Archives.

if any, is less to defend the territory and more to serve as a tripwire. They are there to guarantee that the United States will retaliate in case of an assault.

But deterrence by punishment is less applicable to the situations in Ukraine and Taiwan. The credibility of the U.S. punishing Russia or China in case of an offensive against, respectively, Ukraine or Taiwan, is small for three reasons.

- First, the U.S. is facing multiple simultaneous threats in different geographic areas, and it is plausible to see a modicum of cooperation between Moscow and Beijing (e.g., a coordinated pressure on their respective targets). Such a scenario would stretch American capabilities, at a minimum making it necessary to choose where to respond, if at all. This is the risk of American strategic insolvency.
- Second, deterrence by punishment requires the ability to retaliate and impose greater costs on the enemy than to oneself. But while U.S. military power is formidable, it is in relative decline compared to China but also to Russia (because of the local preponderance Russia has on its borders). Spending more on defense, however, risks exacerbating American fiscal insolvency.
- Third, no matter how much we support these countries rhetorically, Taiwan, and certainly Ukraine, are not full treaty allies and there is—and there will be—no consistent and sizeable American military presence there that could serve as a tripwire strengthening deterrence by punishment.

What is left in the U.S. toolkit is the threat of cutting off Russia and China from the rest of the world, either by preventing their (mostly China's) access to sea-lanes or by sanctioning their (mostly Russia's) economies. For instance, in case of another Russian invasion of Ukraine the U.S. could impose new sanctions, confiscate offshore assets of members of Russia's ruling elites, or, in the most extreme case, expel Russia from the financial system (e.g., from SWIFT). In China's case, some of these financial tools could be combined with more assertive maritime operations severing Chinese access to the sea and disrupting port operations.

The spectrum of escalation is obviously wide. But the question is whether such threats are credible to our rivals. After all, these are not cost-free actions for the U.S. and its allies. There will be both domestic and foreign opposition to such escalatory responses. Moreover, the imposed costs may not be as large as we expect them to be, especially in relation to the objectives desired by our enemies. Russia is already the target of several sanction regimes, and has demonstrated its ability to survive them without affecting its political stability. As with the recent military buildup on its western frontier, Russia appears unfazed by the possibility of more economic sanctions in case of a westward military offensive. Economic pain alone is unlikely to deter powers that want to occupy territories they deem part of their civilizational core.

Hence, the most effective deterrent has to come from the targeted countries. Taiwan and Ukraine must be credible fighters that will make any conventional attack by China and Russia a difficult—very costly and long—endeavor. Local deterrence by denial is the key to regional stability.

To deny an easy victory to China and Russia, Taiwan and Ukraine have to preserve, and increase, two features of their states. First, they have to build up their military capabilities, including the ability to mobilize their population for a protracted insurgency. Despite all the talk about “disinformation,” “competing narratives,” and “need for social resilience,” the plain truth is that the threats presented by China and Russia are military, old-fashioned invasions. The only way to deter them is by defeating their military advances or, at a minimum, by promising that their offensives will be exceedingly costly and lengthy—and that, even were they to succeed in occupying new territories, that occupation will be bloody.

The specific assets that these countries need will vary, depending on their geography, the nature of the military threat, and their military's ability to employ them. But the purpose is simple: make the enemy's offensive costly and slow it down to allow the organization of counterbalancing efforts from the U.S. and other allies.

Second, in order for such military capabilities to be credible, the local populations must be culturally self-confident. They have to want to be independent, manifesting that deeply held desire through their willingness to mobilize and to fight a long war. Deterrence by denial is effective when the deterring side shows its willingness to accept a high level of risk. We should therefore encourage national self-confidence rather than try to promote some universal vision of progressive uniformity. Nations, not a vacuous global community, can deny enemies access to their territories.

In brief, the best response to Russian and Chinese aggressiveness is the return of strong nation-states, willing to protect their distinctiveness through the mobilization of their populations.

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- 1 See also Jakub Grygiel and A. Wess Mitchell, "A Preclusive Strategy to Defend the NATO Frontier," *American Interest* (December 2014), <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2014/12/02/a-preclusive-strategy-to-defend-the-nato-frontier/>.



JAKUB GRYGIEL is a professor of politics at the Catholic University of America (Washington, DC) and a senior advisor at The Marathon Initiative. In 2017–2018 he was a Senior Advisor in the Office of Policy Planning at the Department of State. Previously, he was a Senior Fellow at the Center for European Policy Analysis and on the faculty of SAIS-Johns Hopkins University in Washington, DC. He is the author of *Return of the Barbarians* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), *Great Powers and Geopolitical Change* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), and co-author with Wess Mitchell of *The Unquiet Frontier* (Princeton University Press, 2016). His writings have appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, *The American Interest*, *Security Studies*, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, *The National Interest*, *Claremont Review of Books*, *Orbis*, *Commentary*, *Parameters*, as well as several U.S. and foreign newspapers. He earned a Ph.D., M.A., and an MPA from Princeton University, and a BSFS *Summa Cum Laude* from Georgetown University.

Related Commentary

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- Douglas Murray, “Deterrence in East Asia,” <https://www.hoover.org/research/deterrence-east-asia>
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- John Yoo, “Keeping the Peace in the Indo-Pacific with Nuclear Weapons,” <https://www.hoover.org/research/keeping-peace-indo-pacific-nuclear-weapons>

Discussion Questions

1. In the current post-Afghanistan landscape, what are the most effective ways that the United States could deter aggressions against Ukraine and Taiwan?
2. To what degree are the autonomies of Ukraine and Taiwan geo-strategically connected?
3. How do Putin's ambitions of annexation differ from those of the Chinese Communist Party?
4. Is Ukraine or Taiwan the more likely to earn allied support in time of impending invasion?
5. Should either Ukraine or Taiwan be formally incorporated into a Western defense alliance?



IN THE NEXT ISSUE
Ripples of Ukraine

Military History in Contemporary Conflict

As the very name of Hoover Institution attests, military history lies at the very core of our dedication to the study of “War, Revolution, and Peace.” Indeed, the precise mission statement of the Hoover Institution includes the following promise: “The overall mission of this Institution is, from its records, to recall the voice of experience against the making of war, and by the study of these records and their publication, to recall man’s endeavors to make and preserve peace, and to sustain for America the safeguards of the American way of life.” From its origins as a library and archive, the Hoover Institution has evolved into one of the foremost research centers in the world for policy formation and pragmatic analysis. It is with this tradition in mind, that the “Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict” has set its agenda—reaffirming the Hoover Institution’s dedication to historical research in light of contemporary challenges, and in particular, reinvigorating the national study of military history as an asset to foster and enhance our national security. By bringing together a diverse group of distinguished military historians, security analysts, and military veterans and practitioners, the working group seeks to examine the conflicts of the past as critical lessons for the present.

Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict

The Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict examines how knowledge of past military operations can influence contemporary public policy decisions concerning current conflicts. The careful study of military history offers a way of analyzing modern war and peace that is often underappreciated in this age of technological determinism. Yet the result leads to a more in-depth and dispassionate understanding of contemporary wars, one that explains how particular military successes and failures of the past can be often germane, sometimes misunderstood, or occasionally irrelevant in the context of the present.

Strategika

Strategika is a journal that analyzes ongoing issues of national security in light of conflicts of the past—the efforts of the Military History Working Group of historians, analysts, and military personnel focusing on military history and contemporary conflict. Our board of scholars shares no ideological consensus other than a general acknowledgment that human nature is largely unchanging. Consequently, the study of past wars can offer us tragic guidance about present conflicts—a preferable approach to the more popular therapeutic assumption that contemporary efforts to ensure the perfectibility of mankind eventually will lead to eternal peace. New technologies, methodologies, and protocols come and go; the larger tactical and strategic assumptions that guide them remain mostly the same—a fact discernable only through the study of history.



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Hoover Institution, Stanford University
434 Galvez Mall
Stanford, CA 94305-6003
650-723-1754

Hoover Institution in Washington
1399 New York Avenue NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005
202-760-3200

