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The International Environment and Threat Backdrop

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Today's global situation is undoubtedly as complex as any the United States has ever faced. A rising China, revanchist and violent Russia, nuclear-armed North Korea (to say nothing of Pakistan and India, and possibly other nuclear proliferators in the future), nuclear-desirous Iran, the ongoing threat of terrorism—together with twenty-first-century transnational threats including cyber dangers, pandemics, advanced biological pathogens, and climate change—and it all makes for a geostrategic witches' brew.¹ The ongoing war in Ukraine is a serious threat not only to the people and sovereignty of Ukraine but indeed to the broader region and the world.

That said, we would do well not to overreact. The current period remains an era without a great-power war. There is a very high probability this will remain the case if the United States and its allies stay vigilant and resolute but also calm and restrained.

The essence of American grand strategy since the end of World War II—the maintenance of strong and credible military alliances with most of the world's major democratic and industrial powers, backed by the forward deployment or stationing of US combat forces on the territories of geographically exposed American allies, and American conventional and nuclear power writ large—remains a very good construct for maximizing the odds of successful deterrence.² Strong bipartisan consensus for an \$858 billion US national defense budget this year, exceeding peak levels of the Cold War in inflation-adjusted terms, also bodes well. So do recent bipartisan decisions to strengthen America's technological and industrial foundations in key sectors at home.

The views expressed in this chapter are solely those of the individual author and do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization with which they are, or have been, affiliated.

It is an honor to be participating in this timely Stanford project with the likes of H.R. McMaster and General Jim Mattis, two friends and heroes of mine (there will undoubtedly be others in the conference about whom I would say the same!). They did much to construct a National Security Strategy (NSS) and a National Defense Strategy (NDS) early in the Trump era that can stand the test of time and guide us wisely into the difficult world of the 2020s. The Biden administration has benefited greatly from these documents. In its own strategies, it has sought to build on the 2017 NSS and 2018 NDS rather than to change them fundamentally, as a number of its officials have told me in public and in private. Despite the polemics of partisan politics in the contemporary United States, we have a rather strong underpinning for national consensus on key security issues of the day. In particular, the framing of a grand strategy around the concept of the return of great-power competition is compelling. Indeed, I believe the Trump team of McMaster, Mattis, and others was more correct than its successor in emphasizing Russia and China equally—the Biden team may go somewhat too far in prioritizing the People's Republic of China (PRC) at a time when Russia is killing tens of thousands in the heart of Eurasia. Former chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Joseph Dunford was also right to emphasize a “four-plus-one” threat framework lest we forget about North Korea, Iran, and terrorism—though in the interest of keeping this paper reasonably short, I will not dwell on the latter three concerns here.

Yet, if I had one additional word of counsel for the United States today, it would be to avoid demonizing China, even as we focus squarely and correctly on addressing its capabilities and its ambitions. We are at risk of overhyping the China threat. I agree with 80 to 90 percent of our policies that focus on addressing that threat, but the last 10 to 20 percent (notionally speaking) may be on the verge of going too far. Much of the rest of this paper is written, accordingly, as a provocation. It is not my own effort to mimic the worldwide threat assessments that the directors of national intelligence or defense intelligence agencies produce each winter. Instead, this is an interpretative essay about what we are getting right and what we perhaps are not in what is quickly becoming a new collective wisdom in the United States about the nature of the China threat in particular.

General Strategic Considerations

For some, the rise of China poses an inordinate risk to global order. Graham Allison, a brilliant Harvard strategist and historian, has coined the phrase

“Thucydides trap” to underscore the risks when a rising power challenges an existing and established rival (though in his era, it was a rising partial democracy, Athens, that increasingly challenged an existing “hegemon,” Sparta). In the specific case of China, we face an autocratic regime brimming with confidence, a strong desire to bring Taiwan back under its rule, and substantial ambitions in the Western Pacific, broader Middle East, and beyond. China wields the world’s largest manufacturing base, second-largest economy by traditional exchange-rate measures, largest economy when adjusted for purchasing power parity, and impressive technological capabilities in the crucial digital and cyber sectors. It now has the world’s second largest population (India’s exceeds China’s by a whisker)—though that is a mixed blessing, given that its working-age population has already peaked in size. Demographics will largely work against China in the decades to come.

Allison is right to warn in general terms about what such big changes have meant historically. But there is so much that is different about today’s world. To repeat, there exists a preponderance of democracies forming the core of the modern US-led alliance system, along with strong and standing and often forward-deployed or forward-stationed American military forces to undergird those alliances, nuclear deterrence, and some aspects of globalization. Combined, these features give considerable reason for hope that past patterns in great-power relations can be changed. Arguably, since 1945, they already have been, despite the partial backsliding in recent years.³

The Biden administration’s NSS prioritizes China as the “most consequential strategic competitor” of the United States, and its NDS designates the PRC as America’s “pacing challenge.” These are reasonable terms. They have led the Biden team, like the Trump team before it, to increase defense spending, emphasize military innovation and modernization within the defense budget, seek to address national vulnerabilities in cyber and space and infrastructural domains, prioritize the Pacific region in national security terms, and undertake a number of key initiatives to that same end with major allies and partners. All of this is to the good. None of it was easy or automatic. None is guaranteed to endure unless we stay appropriately vigilant.

There is vigorous debate in the United States over whether Beijing might see a window of opportunity to attack Taiwan by the late 2020s. The former head of US Indo-Pacific Command, Admiral Philip Davidson, has warned of that possibility.⁴ Secretary of State Tony Blinken concluded by October 2022 that China had become “determined to pursue reunification on a much faster timeline.”⁵ Xi Jinping has told his military to be fully modernized and ready

for all contingencies by 2027.⁶ Some strategists also believe that, in light of its demographic decline and other internal challenges that could get much worse by the 2030s, China may perceive itself to have a relatively narrow window of opportunity to take Taiwan in the late 2020s or so.⁷ It is true that China faces long-term economic and environmental challenges that are quite significant.⁸

But on the latter point, I see little evidence that Chinese leaders lack confidence in their country's long-term future. And as for Xi's promulgation of a 2027 deadline for modernization, his language may be mostly hortatory. The idea that any military can ever complete a full modernization program by a certain date is never quite plausible; military innovation is continuous in the real world.⁹ Thus, some scholars, while hardly downplaying the China threat, tend to view it as a more general and lasting problem as opposed to an acute challenge in a given window of time.¹⁰ I lean toward this latter interpretation myself, largely because China is in the business of issuing various kinds of five-year, ten-year, and other plans—not all of which can be linked to specific and secret and binding military plans for the future. Notably, Beijing's Made in China 2025 plan, promulgated back in 2015, calls for China to be a leader in ten high-tech sectors, including a number of technology sectors such as robotics, with major military relevance by the year 2025; other plans focus on 2030 or 2035, or aspire to major changes by the one hundredth anniversary of Chinese Communist Party rule in China in 2049.¹¹

What about the Russia threat? We must not lose sight of that challenge—as General McMaster and Secretary Mattis rightly underscored in their 2017 and 2018 documents. It is Russia, after all, that is laying waste to cities in Europe and issuing nuclear threats against the West even as these words are written; it is Vladimir Putin who seems to have a pathological hatred of all things Ukrainian, especially its (admirable) leader Volodymyr Zelensky, and a contempt for the idea that there even should be such a thing as an independent Ukrainian nation.¹² Ironically, Putin's aggressions against Ukraine may have done more to unify and cohere its people and stoke their sense of distinctiveness as well as nationalism than anything else in their history.¹³ And Putin continues to act on these sentiments, with little evidence that what is left of Russian democracy can exert any meaningful checks and balances on his behavior. Putin has also spent two decades building up resentment against the West—over NATO and EU expansion, the Kosovo war, American support for “colored revolutions” in Ukraine and Georgia in the early 2000s, American support for some of Putin's political opponents at home, and what Putin sees as unilateralist American blundering from Iraq to Afghanistan and Libya after 9/11.

Putin has spent recent years in Russia further marginalizing his internal critics and weakening, if not ending his country's democracy.¹⁴ Alas, the history of leaders like Putin around the world hardly suggests that he will likely leave office soon—or that he will be replaced by a more democratic and benign political system once gone.¹⁵

Some have described Russia as a regional power with nuclear weapons, or a giant gas station, or some other such derogatory term. Although it is true that Russia's GDP is comparable to that of a midlevel Western European power and that its scientific and technology capacity has atrophied (even before the sanctions of 2022), it is hardly to be trifled with.¹⁶ It is the world's top nuclear weapons state, the world's largest country, the world's most geographically exposed and yet geographically menacing country (those two attributes being flip sides of the same coin), and a proud nation with a strong sense of national identity and global purpose. It has four times the population of Iraq or Afghanistan (or Ukraine). Moreover, in its near abroad, it is highly motivated and reasonably powerful—a combination that Kathryn Stoner convincingly argues gives it considerable power and influence in some key parts of Europe.¹⁷

All that said, I believe we have most of the makings of a successful Russia policy today. Supporting Ukraine strongly in its war effort, sustaining sanctions on Russia, and fortifying NATO's eastern flank provide the raw ingredients for a successful Russia policy in the months and years to come—provided we stay focused, vigilant, and united.

It will be entirely fair game if a GOP-majority House of Representatives asks for more accountability and more answers to tough questions about the endgame for the Ukraine war as it considers future Biden administration requests for aid for Ukraine. But such questioning must not actually interrupt the flow of crucial assistance or smack of irresoluteness on our collective part. Provided we get that balance right and think creatively about that endgame in Ukraine, I believe our Russia policy can succeed. Thus, I will spend more time below on China, where we do not yet have the paradigm quite right, in my judgment.

Rightsizing the China Threat

Whatever the most relevant time frame, and even in light of the importance of staying focused on the challenges posed by China's rise, I believe it is crucial that we keep our strategic composure and sense of perspective on the nature of the problem. America is capable of groupthink, as we arguably saw, for example, in the Vietnam War and in the prelude to the Iraq invasion of

2003. We need to avoid the temptation to unify so strongly around the China threat paradigm that we unwittingly increase the risks of confrontation ourselves—perhaps by goading Taiwan toward provocative action, or overreacting to a crisis in the South China Sea or East China Sea.

Consider the nature of the PRC's foreign policy. It is certainly concerning. China has, for example, been assertive and threatening in the South China Sea and East China Sea (and along its Himalayan border with India). However, while assertive, sometimes imprudent, and occasionally downright aggressive, China's behavior in the Western Pacific has generally stopped short of belligerence or the lethal use of force. We are dealing with a country that has not gone to war since 1979. That fact should count for something.

Even on law of the sea matters, where China's behavior is unsettling, there is nuance in the situation. Even India does not share Washington's view about so-called freedom of navigation operations. Delhi believes that any country wishing to traverse not just the territorial seas but, in fact, the exclusive economic zones (generally extending out two hundred nautical miles from the coastline) of another nation should request permission for such a transit in advance.¹⁸ China, of course, agrees.

The United States should continue to operate its naval forces freely in the South China Sea. But it should not, to my mind, be too surprised that China finds such operations off-putting.¹⁹ The broader debate should also bear in mind that, by Washington's reckoning, dozens of countries commit infractions of customary law and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. However, the fact that the United States itself has not ratified the latter puts it on shaky legal ground with regard to this whole subject. According to the Department of Defense (DoD), in 2021, American allies Italy, Japan, South Korea, and Costa Rica were among the perpetrators!²⁰ To be sure, China's assertiveness puts it in a separate category from most others.²¹ But the existence of a disagreement between Washington and Beijing over maritime rights does not itself prove that China seeks to overturn the rules-based order. More accurately, I believe it is trying to modify that order to suit its own interests.

Ongoing commitment to forward presence in international airways and sea-lanes, combined with institutional vehicles like the Quad (with Japan, India, and Australia) as well as the new AUKUS arrangement (with Canberra and London)—and the continued refinement of “integrated deterrence” as an instrument of US and allied security policy that promises economic punishment and military realignments in response to low-grade Chinese aggression—provide reasons to think that most of China's broader impulses and

ambitions can be mitigated.²² I do not see integrated deterrence as an alternative to robust military capabilities or a means of cutting the defense budget. Rather, it provides a more credible type of deterrent for scenarios that either do not rise to the level of seriousness where direct and lethal military response would be appropriate or that challenge US and allied military capabilities to the point where a military response may not be successful.

Then there is Taiwan. It may represent the most dangerous flashpoint in the US-China relationship, with China viewing the island of twenty-three million as integral to its own territory and the United States seeing Taiwan as a valuable democratic partner (and with some others viewing America's commitment to Taiwan as a canary in the coal mine on its broader commitment to Asian allies in the face of China's rise).

Deterring China from attacking Taiwan, however, *should* be a doable strategic task—provided that Taiwan itself does not force the issue of independence. An attempt to invade and conquer Taiwan would be a huge strategic roll of the dice by Beijing, with a high probability of failure. Taipei as well as Washington have options to make its prospects even less likely in the coming years, with the right kinds of military modernizations that put sensors and antiship missiles in survivable locations on shore and on survivable platforms like the XQ-58A unmanned aircraft, which can be launched like a rocket and recovered by parachute.²³ These are the best ways to more confidently deter an invasion attempt. A Chinese blockade might have better prospects of tactical military success if the goal is to squeeze Taiwan into submission economically. But a blockade is also a much more indirect and uncertain form of military coercion than an invasion. It also carries, just like the invasion scenario, considerable escalation risks of its own.²⁴

So I say “yes” to deterring Chinese attacks, especially on Taiwan. We must stay focused intently on military modernization efforts across the board. Focusing on China as a pacing challenge—our most consequential strategic competitor—in military and technological terms is wise.

But in some other ways, we may go too far. Take, for example, the Biden administration's highly inflammatory use of the term “genocide” to describe China's treatment of its Uyghur population in Xinjiang province, as witnessed in the US 2022 NSS and other pronouncements.²⁵ Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had accused China of the same heinous crime in the latter weeks of the Trump administration. I would submit that this is not the right term—and words matter in such domains. Beijing does commit severe repression against the Uyghurs. It should be held accountable for that repression. A recent UN

Human Rights Council investigative report chose the correct language, determining that China has been committing “serious human rights violations” in its August 2022 report on the subject, unlike the US Department of State under both Secretary Pompeo and Secretary Blinken.²⁶ But diluting a culture and even curtailing some reproductive rights, however morally and politically objectionable, do not constitute genocide. That latter term has a clear and palpable historical and political meaning that conjures up images of gas chambers and mass butchery. Whatever the lawyers may be able to argue, what China does in Xinjiang is terrible, but it is not genocide.

It is also increasingly common to hear China described, at least by national security hawks, as an adversary or enemy. This approach risks creating a self-fulfilling prophecy, convincing us that a military showdown is at some point inevitable when that mindset could increase the risks of a crisis escalating. It could also lead us, wittingly or unwittingly, to support Taiwan’s aspirations for independence more than prudence should dictate.

As McMaster’s excellent *The Atlantic* article of a few years ago underscored, there is too much swagger in Xi’s inner circle.²⁷ Yet there do also seem to be checks and balances and restraint. Notably, to date, Beijing appears not to have sent any weaponry to Russia during the Ukraine war, despite Putin’s requests that China do so.²⁸ Yet the Pentagon’s 2022 Annual Report to Congress on China does not acknowledge this crucial limitation in China-Russia cooperation.²⁹ We risk taking it for granted or overlooking it when, in fact, this lack of coordination is a very important and desirable reality.

China’s military budget, while robust, remains at less than 2 percent of its GDP—the level considered a *minimal* acceptable effort, on burden-sharing terms, within the NATO alliance. Of course, NATO is a defensive alliance, and China’s recent actions are often too assertive. The point is not that China is unthreatening—only that by most metrics, it is not engaged in blatant arms racing either.

China’s ambitions to build perhaps 1,500 nuclear warheads, around five times what it has contented itself with in the past, may be regrettable. But a superpower like the United States, with five thousand warheads of its own, should not be surprised that a rising superpower like the PRC desires to have one-third that total itself. China’s decision to pursue a nuclear buildup may be regrettable—and may complicate American strategy—but it is not, in and of itself, reckless.³⁰

The Pentagon also harps on the fact that, by ship count, China now has the world’s largest navy. It generally fails to note, however, that because US ships

are typically much bigger, America's naval tonnage exceeds China's by a ratio of about two to one.³¹ Neither metric is adequate as a way of understanding the military balance or predicting combat outcomes; both, and others as well, need to be considered in any serious net assessment.

Rather than pit China as already an adversary, as some prominent American voices have done, it is better to view it as a rival and competitor—but one that we should try to steer back toward the rules-based international order with a long-term goal of fostering cooperation. As Asia expert and former George W. Bush administration senior official Mike Green has convincingly written, when describing the overall grand strategy toward China of Japan, South Korea, and Australia, while advocating that Washington think similarly:

All three major allies seek to work with Beijing on issues of concern from a position of strength backed by closer alignment with the United States and other like-minded countries in the region. Put another way, US allies in Asia still hope for some version of the strategy that US presidents from Richard Nixon to Obama pursued in the region: a combination of balancing and engaging China, but with a longer-term aim of integrating the country under rules favorable to the advanced industrial democracies. The idea is to compete with China, but with a clear end state in mind.³²

Conclusion: Russia and China Together

What about the possibility of *both* Russia and China confronting the West militarily at the same time? It is indeed prudent to consider the possibility.³³ Militarily, it is crucial that we not allow either to achieve *faits accomplis* quickly as a result of teaming together; that would tempt deterrence failure. Hence the importance of protecting Eastern Europe with forward US and NATO military deployments and ensuring that Taiwan, with or even without American and allied help, has the ability to fend off a Chinese amphibious assault effectively.

But I do not see much evidence about a true anti-American axis emerging in Moscow or Beijing. Again, the latter has chosen *not* to provide weaponry to the former during the Ukraine war. A chief goal of US national security policy should be to keep things that way—avoiding policies that would unnecessarily drive Russia and China closer together. I also believe that the difficulty of deterring Russia from attacking NATO territory in Europe is moderate at most; proper forward stationing of defense assets in eastern alliance member

states should be up to the task, given the limitations on Russia's military capabilities as well as the impressive strength and cohesion of the NATO alliance. It is largely for this reason that I do not think American combat forces need to be sized and structured for a possible war against both China and Russia at once. However, my relatively sanguine assessment depends on an outcome to the current Ukraine war that seeks to offer some way for Russia eventually to rejoin the international community in good standing. Notably, Ukraine should not, in my view, be brought into NATO; alternative security structures are needed instead.³⁴

Similar logic applies to the Korean peninsula, where the US presence is already correctly sized and situated. As such, the United States does not need a true two-war capability—a standard it has often struggled to meet in the past, even when it attempted to achieve it.³⁵ And the 2022 NDS is correct not to set that overly ambitious standard for sizing American military forces.

Thus, in my view, the 2022 NDS of the Biden administration is correct to focus on fighting only a single adversary at a time. To wit, it says, "Building on the 2018 NDS [National Defense Strategy, under Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis], the 2022 NDS *Force Planning Construct* sizes and shapes the Joint Force to simultaneously defend the homeland; maintain strategic deterrence; and deter and, if necessary, prevail in conflict."³⁶

In some ways, this sentence understates the capabilities of the strategy. Even in the event of war against Russia or China, forward-stationed forces in the other theater will likely remain in position—providing a measure of capability. Because any attack against them (say, against US forces stationed in Poland, the Baltic states, or Romania) would almost inevitably lead to American retaliation—if not immediately, then eventually—some degree of deterrence would likely remain. That is also true, thankfully, on the Korean peninsula.

Our system of treaty-based alliances and forward-based military forces has helped keep the great-power peace for seventy-seven years through thick and thin. There is good reason to believe it can do so in the future as well, even in today's troubling and complex threat environment.

Notes

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