

# > Six Propositions about Great-Power Competition and Revisionism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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*Of all the geopolitical challenges that American policymakers face today, few have the potential to reshape the international system so profoundly as great-power competition. Relations between the great powers are the single biggest make-or-break issue in determining whether the international environment will be characterized by major war or relative peace; they also condition the international community's response to virtually major other international challenge. To the extent that great-power cooperation prevails, the international system will generally be more effective in addressing transnational challenges or problems requiring multilateral action; to the extent that great-power competition or conflict prevails, effective action to address such challenges will be harder to generate.*

Due to limitations of time and space, this paper does not attempt any comprehensive discussion of the present and future of great-power competition or the great-power revisionism we increasingly see today. It simply offers six basic propositions about these subjects, as a way of stimulating further discussion and debate.

The first proposition is fairly obvious—it is simply that **great-power competition, often of a violent variety, is more the norm than the exception in the history of international affairs.** Clashing interests and clashing ideologies have long driven the leading powers in the system to compete with one another; they have often led to intense conflict and war. The importance of this point is simply that if we see the resurgence of great-power competition that is occurring today as something that is new or unfamiliar, we are simply being ahistorical. It is actually the past 25-30 years—the period since the end of the Cold War, a period that has featured abnormally low levels of explicit great-power rivalry—that have constituted the exception insofar as relations among the major powers are concerned.<sup>1</sup>

The second proposition is that **great-power frictions and competition never fully went away even during the post-Cold War era; they were simply muted by the two defining features of the post-Cold War international system.** The first feature was simply the sheer margin of American dominance, which muted great-power tensions by making it unprofitable for revisionist states—those states that had some grievance with the existing international system—to push back against that system as strongly as they might have liked to do.<sup>2</sup> The Russians were strongly opposed to NATO expansion from the mid-1990s onward—which they viewed as a form of geopolitical competition being waged against them by the United States—but they were powerless to do much about it. The Chinese never stopped wanting to retake Taiwan or to once again become the leading power in the Asia-Pacific, but they were constrained from pursuing that goal too openly or explicitly at a time when the U.S. military enjoyed a vast preponderance of power in that area.

The second key feature of the international system was the degree of ideological convergence that seemed to be emerging in the early post-Cold War era. There was little great-power competition between the United States and the developed industrial powers of Western Europe and East Asia because those countries were all part of a security community bound together not simply by interests and institutions but also by common liberal democratic values. There was also a widespread sense in the 1990s—which was somewhat although entirely naïve, in retrospect—that Russia and China were moving toward economic liberalism, that sooner or later economic liberalism would lead to political liberalism, and that this process would eventually help make those countries fully satisfied members of the international system and of the democratic security community in the West. So by this logic, ideological transformation would

*This paper reflects the individual views of the author.*

ultimately make it possible to transcend traditional great-power competition.<sup>3</sup>

But this leads to the third proposition, which is that **great-power competition has returned in fuller and sharper form today because the systemic conditions for such competition have become more propitious—and because some of the great hopes of the post-Cold War era have now been dispelled.** The United States is still clearly the dominant power in the international system, but the margin of that dominance has slipped since the 1990s and early 2000s, and it has slipped particularly along the periphery of those authoritarian great powers that are now acting in more revisionist fashion—Russia and China. The United States is still clearly the dominant power in the international system, but its margin of dominance vis-à-vis the major authoritarian powers has slipped—militarily with respect to Russia, and economically and militarily with respect to China. The U.S. military still has unrivaled global power-projection capabilities, for instance, but the balance of power is much more contested in the Western Pacific or in Eastern Europe, as a result of both disadvantageous geography and targeted military buildups by Moscow and Beijing.<sup>4</sup> So the military constraints on great-power competition are weaker than they were two decades ago.

At the same time, it has become clear that the Russian and Chinese regimes are not headed inexorably toward greater economic and political liberalism, and that they see America's promotion of democratic values and human rights as significant threats to their own stability and security. If the great hope of the post-Cold War era was that ideological convergence would lead to great-power peace, today ideological difference has reemerged as a spur to great-power rivalry.<sup>5</sup>

The fourth proposition, accordingly, is that **great-power competition and revisionism are sharper today than at any time since the end of the Cold War.** We are seeing that competition in the geopolitical realm, in the sense that Russia and China are increasingly seeking to carve out spheres of dominant influence within their respective “near abroads,” to undermine U.S. alliances and partnerships in these areas, and to develop military capabilities needed to achieve regional primacy and project power even further abroad. We are seeing that competition in the ideological realm, in the way that Moscow and Beijing are increasingly pushing back against the spread of liberal political values, seeking to promote authoritarian models of governance, and (particularly in Moscow's case) working to undermine

liberal democracy in the West. We are seeing this competition with respect to global rules and norms, as these and other authoritarian powers increasingly contest the rules and norms that the United States has sought to enshrine, such as freedom of navigation, non-aggression, and peaceful resolution of disputes. And we are seeing it in the way that officials in Moscow, Beijing, and Washington alike are talking fairly explicitly than about the possibility of conflict and even war between the United States and its rivals. Across all these areas, resurgent great-power competition and rivalry are testing the contours of the existing international system more strenuously than at any time since the Cold War.<sup>6</sup>

So all that is the backdrop to great-power competition as we understand it today.

The good news—and this is a fifth proposition—is that intensified **great-power competition is certainly going to lead to a more dangerous and disorderly international environment, but it need not necessarily lead to a major crackup of the existing international system.** The fact that the major authoritarian great powers are pushing back more strongly against that international order and its defenders—principally the United States and its allies—means that we are likely to see more diplomatic and military crises and a generally higher level of international tensions in the coming years. It is going to make it harder to achieve meaningful multilateral cooperation among the great powers on common security challenges—just look at how great power rivalry has stymied efforts to resolve the Syrian civil war over the past 6 years.<sup>7</sup>

But it is important to remember that the preponderance of global power is still on the side of those countries that support the international system rather than those trying to revise it. The United States and its allies no longer account for roughly three-quarters of global GDP and world defense spending, but they still account for about 60 percent of the global share in both categories; they are bound together in longstanding associations like NATO and the U.S. alliance system in the Asia-Pacific; and they have dominant influence in many of the major international institutions.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, there are structural features of the current international system—nuclear deterrence and the high degree of economic interdependence between the United States and China—that will likely act as a break on great-power conflict, even if they will surely not guarantee the absence of such conflict. So the international system is in for some rough sledding in the years ahead, but if the

defenders of that system can get their act together—if they can act with purpose and unity—there is no inherent reason they cannot mount a credible defense of the arrangements that have served them so well.

That's the good news. The bad news—and this is the sixth and final proposition—is that **to the extent that the phenomena that are the subject of this conference—nationalism, populism, and retrenchment—grow stronger in the coming years, they will generally make it harder for the United States and its friends to meet the challenge of intensified great-power competition.** All of these phenomena are broad and they sometimes pull in opposite directions, so there are a lot of caveats attached to this proposition. But in general, I think these dynamics are bad news for those who hope that the international order can be successfully defended from the sort of revisionist challenges we see today.

Consider the influence of populism. There are many variants of populism, because populism is less of an ideology than a political strategy, and so populism can come in left-wing forms or right-wing forms, democratic forms or illiberal forms. But a significant swath of the populism ferment we are seeing today, particularly in Europe, is likely to have the effect of straining the cohesion of coalitions that are crucial to countering Russian revisionism. If NATO is indeed an alliance that is rooted in its democratic principles, then the rise of illiberal populism in countries such as Turkey, Hungary, and Poland (to say nothing of France) is likely to somewhat attenuate the ideological bonds that hold the alliance together. The fact that many right-wing populist movements in Europe (and also in the United States) are relatively pro-Russian has the potential to further test the unity of NATO and the European Union in confronting threats from the East.

Finally, insofar as political populism is driving the more general crisis of the European project, it is likely to produce a Europe that is more consumed by its own difficulties and less able to act vigorously vis-à-vis Russian revisionism.<sup>9</sup>

Two crucial caveats here: So far the EU and NATO have actually held up better than expected in the face of Russian behavior since 2014, and it is possible that the populist wave may have crested in the Dutch and French elections this year and now be receding. But if this is not the case, and populist movements make further gains in the coming years, the geopolitical consequences are likely to be troubling.

Or think about the role of nationalism. Nationalism is obviously one of the forces behind the resurgence of great-power competition; it is also one of the forces motivating countries in Europe and the Asia Pacific to resist Chinese and Russian pressure. But the most geopolitically significant form of nationalism today could be the revival of a strong nationalist streak in U.S. foreign policy. To be clear, if by nationalism we simply mean the desire to put the interests of one's own nation first, then U.S. strategy has been strongly nationalist for a very long time. In fact, I would argue that U.S. strategy since 1945 has been very assertively nationalist, because it has shaped a world that has been enormously beneficial to the parochial interests of the United States. But what we are seeing signs of today—in the 2016 campaign, most notably—is that nationalism is often being defined in opposition to internationalism.

Trump's America First rhetoric was based on the idea that America's internationalist project is a sell-out of American interests, and that it is necessary to revert to a more narrowly nationalistic, zero-sum, your gain is our loss approach to foreign policy. This mindset holds, for instance, that supporting free trade, alliances, and other aspects of the existing international system is a sucker bet because it allows other countries to exploit American largesse. Whether this form of nationalism becomes dominant in U.S. foreign policy in the coming years remains to be seen, because the evidence from public opinion polling and other sources is fairly ambiguous.<sup>10</sup> But to the extent that this form of nationalism does exert an influence on U.S. policy, it is likely to weaken America's commitment to the particular role it has played in foreign affairs since 1945, and thereby open the field to revisionist powers such as Russia and China. One example: the U.S. withdrawal from TPP reflects a narrowly nationalist approach to foreign trade, and it is already having the effect of helping Beijing convert the Asia-Pacific into a Chinese lake in economic terms.

Finally, retrenchment. When we discuss retrenchment it is important to differentiate between the essentially tactical retrenchment we saw under Obama—pulling back from overextended positions as part of a broader, continued commitment to an engaged internationalism—and the retrenchment that Trump often seemed to advocate during the campaign, which was a more aggressive form of strategic retrenchment based on the idea that supporting the existing international system is not in America's interests. It is still too early to say how much this latter type of retrenchment will characterize U.S. policy under Trump and after, because the evidence

and informed speculation pulls in both directions, and one can make a case that the political pillars of American internationalism are stronger than they may initially appear. But the fact that Trump is, in fact, president at least compels us to consider seriously the prospect that at some point the United States might cease to play such an extraordinarily engaged and energetic role in global affairs.<sup>11</sup>

Were that to happen, it would remove one of the foremost constraints—indeed, probably the foremost constraint—on the type of great-power revisionism that we have seen in recent years. American retrenchment would likely sap the power and the will of the coalitions that have opposed Russian and Chinese revisionism in Europe and the Asia-Pacific; it would create a far more inviting context in which Moscow and Beijing could seek to reorder the international system to their liking. If, for instance, the United States were to become less involved in opposing Chinese expansion and coercion in the South China Sea, it would be far easier for China to exert its will in that area, and far harder for countries like the Philippines or Vietnam to resist.

We may, in fact, be seeing early signs of this already: There were reports in late July that Vietnam capitulated to a Chinese demand that Hanoi terminate an energy exploration project in its own exclusive economic zone because Beijing had threatened to use force if Vietnam did not comply—and Vietnamese leaders were no longer convinced that the United States, under a Trump administration, would react strongly if conflict did break out.<sup>12</sup> Given the opacity of the political systems involved, it is important to take this reporting with a grain of salt. But it does illustrate the sort of dynamic that could easily become more common in an atmosphere of U.S. retrenchment.

So, to sum up, what we have today is an upswing of great-power competition and revisionism on the one hand, and a variety of factors that could plausibly lead to a downswing in the vigor and coherence of the forces opposing that revisionism on the other. And it is that combination that could be particularly dangerous as the 21<sup>st</sup> century unfolds.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The point was made nearly a decade ago by Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (New York: Vintage, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> William Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” *International Security* 24, 1 (Summer 1999), 5-41.

<sup>3</sup> See, most famously, Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Eric Heginbotham et al., *The U.S.–China Military Scorecard: Forces, Geography, and the Evolving Balance of Power, 1996–2017* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015); David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Wright, *All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and the Future of American Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Wright, *All Measures Short of War*; Walter Russell Mead, “The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers,” *Foreign Affairs* 93, 3 (May/June 2014).

<sup>7</sup> See Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, “The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-First Century: China’s Rise and the Fate of America’s Global Position,” *International Security* 40, 3 (Winter 2015/16), 7-53; Hal Brands, *Dealing with Allies in Decline: Alliance Management and U.S. Strategy in an Era of Global Power Shifts* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> See James Kirchick, *The End of Europe: Dictators, Demagogues, and the Coming Dark Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> See Dina Smeltz, Ivo Daalder, Karl Friedhoff, and Craig Kafura, *America in the Age of Uncertainty: American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Chicago: Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2016); Hal Brands, “Is American Internationalism Dead? Reading the National Mood in the Age of Trump,” *War on the Rocks*, May 16, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> For a pessimistic view, see Robert Kagan, “Trump Marks the End of America as World’s ‘Indispensable Nation,’” *Financial Times*, November 19, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Bill Hayton, “The Week Donald Trump Lost the South China Sea,” *Foreign Policy*, July 31, 2017.