Great-Power Competition Isn’t a Foreign Policy

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The past year has witnessed two major developments that have trained the sights of US policymakers more sharply on America’s chief strategic competitors. First, the conclusion of a protracted US intervention in Afghanistan would seem to offer Russia and China an opening to make strategic inroads across Central Asia. Second, Russia’s brutal invasion of Ukraine has raised the specter of a military confrontation between nuclear-armed powers and revealed China to be, while not actively supporting Russian atrocities, then at least concerningly unmoved by them.

Both developments have elicited a vigorous debate in Washington over some of the most fundamental questions of US power, policy, and purpose. How efficacious is military force in achieving political objectives? Which of America’s national interests are vital—as opposed to “merely” important or secondary? What role should the United States aim to play in world affairs? This essay does not attempt to answer them. It aims, less ambitiously, to assess the competitive challenges that Russia and China respectively pose to the United States—an assessment that should inform considerations of the aforementioned questions and, therefore, efforts to sketch the contours of US foreign policy in the early years of this decade.

The first section notes that while recent developments in world affairs have understandably deepened America’s focus on Russia and China, it would be risky for the United States to treat “great-power competition” as a comprehensive blueprint for foreign policy when, in truth, that construct is at most a partial
distillation of contemporary geopolitics. While intensifying strategic frictions with Moscow and Beijing are a central feature of today’s landscape, it is important not to discount the capacities and decisions of other powers or the myriad transnational challenges that affect all powers, “great” or not. In addition, stipulating that great-power frictions are intensifying does not clarify how the United States should manage them. The second section argues that while Russia and China are redoubtable competitors, they are increasingly undercutting themselves. The third section concludes that, in view of that reality, the United States should find a middle ground between complacence and consternation to govern its interactions with those two countries. The fourth section presents ten questions that US policymakers might consider as they seek to steady America’s competitive perch over the long term.

**A Sharpening US Focus on Great-Power Competition**

Washington’s concern over and focus on Moscow and Beijing have been growing steadily over the last decade. Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and China’s steady campaign of land reclamation in the South China Sea were especially telling harbingers of a more turbulent geopolitical environment—an environment that the Trump administration spotlighted prominently in its 2017 national security strategy (NSS) and its 2018 national defense strategy (NDS), which concluded that US foreign policy should principally focus on waging great-power competition with Moscow and Beijing.¹ That conclusion steadily gained bipartisan traction as US-China economic tensions intensified and the geopolitical fallout of the coronavirus pandemic grew more pronounced—and rapidly elicited stronger support with two major events that occurred just six months apart: the end of one war in Central Asia, and the start of another in Eastern Europe.

Some observers argue that the United States will be able to devote greater strategic bandwidth to addressing a revanchist Russia and a resurgent China now that it has ended its military involvement in Afghanistan. Those two countries have exploited Washington’s preoccupation with counterterrorism to undercut US national interests and revise the postwar order, the argument proceeds, and they worry that a less distracted superpower will now be able—and more inclined—to counterbalance them more forcefully.

Others rejoin that the drawdown of US forces will diminish Washington’s competitiveness vis-à-vis Moscow and Beijing—not only by permitting them
to make greater inroads across Central Asia, but also by compelling America’s allies and partners to question the credibility of US security commitments and the strength of its geopolitical resolve. In addition, the argument proceeds, Afghanistan’s potential re-emergence as a base for terrorist attacks and/or a precipitous deterioration in the regional security environment could well require the United States to reprioritize Central Asia; a reduced focus today could necessitate a greater focus tomorrow. Importantly, though, despite reaching different conclusions about the prudence of withdrawal, advocates and critics alike agree that it behooves the United States to devote greater attention to managing strategic tensions with Russia and China.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine this February has amplified that judgment, not only because it suggests that Moscow is far more risk-tolerant than many observers had believed, but also because Beijing, at least publicly, has opted to condemn Washington rather than calling on Moscow to de-escalate. US officials are concerned that, in addition to challenging Russian and Chinese actions short of war, Washington could end up having to contest Moscow and Beijing militarily, potentially even waging a two-front armed confrontation should China decide that US distraction in Eastern Europe affords it a propitious opportunity to attack Taiwan.

Like America’s exit from Afghanistan, Russia’s transgression marks an inflection point for US foreign policy. Some observers argue that it sounds the death knell for America’s longstanding desire to train its sights eastward, making clear the inextricable interdependence between its strategic positions in Europe and Asia. (A comparable argument attended the onset of the Syrian civil war in the early 2010s, with critics of the Obama administration maintaining that the United States could not shore up its position in the Pacific if it were seen to be abandoning the Middle East.) They fear that a failure to deal Russian President Vladimir Putin a decisive military defeat in Ukraine could hasten the collapse of an already fraying order. A more sanguine speculation holds that while Russia’s invasion will necessarily slow US efforts to rebalance to Asia, it could end up facilitating that shift in the medium to long run; after all, rightly fearful and newly vigilant, European countries are readying sweeping defense investments to guard against future Russian aggression. Observers who subscribe to this view contend that, while severely testing the current order, Russia’s invasion could ultimately enable the United States to reduce its security commitments in Europe and cultivate more sustainable security alliances—across that continent as well
as across Asia, where many of China’s neighbors are modernizing their defenses in response to Beijing’s increasingly coercive conduct.

Whatever disagreements they may have over withdrawing from Afghanistan or responding to Russian aggression, though, most US observers now agree even more strongly than they did a year earlier that Washington must accord principal priority to deterring further Russian revanchism over the short term and managing a resurgent China over the longer term—in brief, to orienting US foreign policy more tightly around great-power competition.

The growing ubiquity of that construct reflects a number of realities. Interstate competition has been an enduring characteristic of Westphalian international relations. While the United States remains the world’s lone superpower, it is not as relatively influential as it was in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union’s dissolution, or even two decades earlier. And Russia and China are increasingly contesting a post-Cold War settlement that they regard to be overly US-centric.

It is precisely the incontestability of these premises, however, that has enabled a substantial gap to emerge between invocation and interpretation: individuals who largely subscribe to the same high-level description of today’s competitive landscape can—and do—nonetheless advance very different prescriptions for US foreign policy. In early 2020, Mara Karlin, now Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy, Plans, and Capabilities, observed that “everyone is using the term great-power competition, kind of ad infinitum, and occasionally in contradictory manners.” While finding it encouraging that the construct was being socialized, she warned that it could be appropriated for conflicting purposes “if we don’t figure out what we’re talking about, and we can drive a truck through it.”

Like, say, “the balance of power,” great-power competition captures a phenomenon; it does not articulate a strategy. It is accordingly unclear what “a strategy of great-power competition” would entail or what its objectives would be. As noted earlier, observers have cited the intensification of great-power competition to justify both reduced and heightened US involvement in Central Asia—and are increasingly doing so with respect to Eastern Europe as well. One can cite it, more broadly, to rationalize a less active US foreign policy or a more active one. Noting America’s relative decline, one might argue that the United States should adopt a narrower conception of its vital national interests and concede to Russia and China spheres of influence in their respective near abroads. Alternatively, if one believes that the emergence of such spheres would accelerate Washington’s present trajectory and imperil those interests, one might advise it to contest Moscow and Beijing more forcefully. One questions the analytical soundness and prescriptive utility of an orienting framework that can be employed to support such
different—and, in some cases, antithetical—foreign policy visions. Importantly, even among those who contend that the United States needs to compete more vigorously, there is a wide spectrum of views as to what exactly it should set out to achieve—and how.

The trouble is that intrinsically elastic frameworks rarely generate more circumscribed interpretations with the passage of time; they tend to produce more expansive ones. Consider containment. American diplomat George Kennan argued that Washington should prevent Moscow from achieving dominance in those geographic areas—four besides the Soviet Union, in his estimation—where a large-scale, sustained military buildup could occur. As the Cold War progressed, though, the United States ended up contesting the Soviet Union ubiquitously, fearing that even Soviet inroads where its vital national interests did not appear to be implicated could compromise Washington’s position in the industrial core of the postwar order. While America’s lack of strategic discipline did not affect the ultimate outcome, in large measure due to the Soviet Union’s economic inferiority, it should not go unremarked in accounts of the Cold War or in discussions of US competitive strategy today, for comparable indiscipline would likely prove far more costly in the present geopolitical environment: Russia and China collectively have far greater capacity to distract the United States. Or take the “global war on terrorism”: what began as a narrow effort to target the perpetrators of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks morphed into a sprawling mission that has cost the United States trillions of dollars—precious funds that it could have used to, say, modernize the country’s infrastructure or invigorate global efforts to slow climate change—and undercut the US foreign policymaking apparatus’s ability to adapt to tectonic geopolitical shifts.

Great-power competition is undergoing a comparable evolution. Some observers believe that the United States is charged with pursuing the same core objective that it has articulated since the end of World War II (and perhaps even since Germany’s invasion of Poland in 1939), simply in more challenging circumstances: to forestall the emergence of a hegemon across the Eurasian landmass. As time has passed, though, the center of policymaking and analytical gravity has shifted toward more expansive interpretations of great-power competition’s imperatives: a—if not the—prevailing view now holds that Washington is in a systemic military, economic, and ideological struggle with Moscow and Beijing to determine nothing less than the contours of world order—a struggle that abides few temporal, geographic, or functional limits, if

The challenge is to identify which undertakings the US should not pursue
The challenge is less to determine which undertakings the United States should pursue than to identify which ones it should not.

Indeed, while the framework of great-power competition might appear to restore clarity to US foreign policy after three decades of seeming strategic drift, it risks a reactive US approach to Russia and China: should the United States focus inordinately on countering their present initiatives and preempting their potential provocations, it could end up competing on their terms rather than on its own, subordinating the formulation of an affirmative vision to the execution of reciprocal responses.

**Russia and China as Self-Constraining Competitors**

A reactive posture would be especially unfortunate since Russia and China’s oft-touted reputations for strategic vision are overstated. Russia has made clear that other major powers cannot ignore it. If a country is prepared to absorb significant costs to engage in aggression, there is unfortunately very little that other countries can do to prevent it from proceeding: a nihilistic mindset can generate tremendous influence when it guides a country of Russia’s proportions. Its brutal invasion of Ukraine has shattered the post-Cold War hope that Europe would avert a large-scale ground war and raised the specter of a great-power conflict between Russia and NATO that escalates to the nuclear level. Diversifying away from Russian energy will be costly (Russia has the world’s largest proven reserves of natural gas), as will substituting for Russian wheat (Russia is the world’s largest exporter of the crop).

But it is hard to think of many other decisions that would have proven as swiftly and comprehensively damaging to Russia’s long-term strategic prospects as invading Ukraine will likely prove: Russia has reenergized NATO, reinvigorated transatlantic ties, induced a significant recalibration of German foreign policy, made itself more beholden to China, and curtailed its access to capital markets and technological inputs. Meanwhile, European political parties that had heretofore railed against the European Union (EU) will find it harder to gain traction; those that had promoted European solidarity, by contrast, will be able to argue that their longstanding idealism is now an existential necessity.

It is also difficult to overstate the extent to which Russia has degraded its own deterrence capacity and powered the West’s “weaponization of finance.” Given the vast imbalance between its conventional military capabilities and Ukraine’s, few observers would have predicted that the Russian army would struggle as greatly as it has or that the Ukrainian resistance would put up as stiff a fight as it has. President Putin has received poor advice from his top military and intelligence officials throughout the conflict, whether because they have been fearful of
cautioning him against proceeding or because they have been receiving misguided assessments from their own subordinates. Any hope that he may have harbored or yet possess to reconstitute an approximation of the Soviet Union’s former dominion lies shattered in Ukraine.

Meanwhile, the narrative that Russia had built a “fortress economy” after 2014 has unraveled—not because Moscow did not undertake a series of macroeconomic steps to reduce its vulnerability to external pressure, but because it underestimated the speed and cohesion with which the West would impose crippling sanctions; the World Bank estimates that Russia’s gross domestic product (GDP) will contract by over 11 percent this year.6

In view of these outcomes, an initially widespread hypothesis that Russia’s invasion would embolden China to move on Taiwan has given way to more circumspect conclusions. After all, the difficulties of staging an amphibious landing far exceed those of invading a territorially contiguous neighbor, the People’s Liberation Army has not been tested in combat since 1979, and Washington attaches far greater strategic importance to Taipei than to Kyiv. China is not, of course, predating its approach to Taiwan on the outcome of the Russia-Ukraine war, and it may yet conclude that its economic power would enable it to withstand the military and economic consequences that it would incur were it to launch an attack. Moscow’s woes should nonetheless serve as a cautionary tale for Beijing’s leadership.

It is challenging to assess whether President Putin is acting “rationally” or “irrationally,” for such constructs are inherently subjective. What is objectively indisputable, though, is that Russia’s postwar strategic outlook will be far worse than its prewar one, no matter how the conflict concludes. In Russia, then, the United States has a self-sabotaging competitor.

In China, the United States has a competitor that, while not as blundering, is increasingly self-constraining. Though Beijing now occupies a more central position in the global economy than it did prior to the onset of the pandemic, its strategic prospects are more challenged. In fairness, China would likely have engendered some counterbalancing even if it had undertaken as strenuously as possible to continue heeding Deng Xiaoping’s counsel to “hide our capacities and bide our time”: a country of its scale cannot hope to avoid scrutiny, especially when it undergoes an unprecedently swift and multifaceted resurgence. But it squandered an extraordinary opportunity that it had at the outset of the pandemic to stabilize its major-power relations and bring its diplomatic stature into greater alignment with its economic heft.
At the end of the first quarter of 2020, China—widely perceived as having confidently, if draconianly, contained the spread of the virus—was dispatching kits of personal protective equipment and teams of doctors to countries in distress. The United States, on the other hand, was floundering in its response, leading many observers to wonder whether the pandemic would hasten a power transition between Washington and Beijing. Given that juxtaposition, one wonders how much more favorable China’s strategic outlook would have looked today had it responded more temperately to calls for an independent inquiry into the origins of the coronavirus; paused its crackdown on Hong Kong and its intimidation of Taiwan; and taken steps to stabilize its relations with Australia, India, Japan, the EU, and the United States.

The Quad, meanwhile, proceeds with clear momentum, no longer an abstraction in search of actualization. The narrow victory of Yoon Seok-youl in South Korea promises not only to make Seoul’s policy toward Beijing more assertive, but also to reduce frictions between Seoul and Tokyo, an enduring impediment to US efforts to shape the Indo-Pacific. Perhaps most tellingly, the EU is recalibrating its disposition toward China, deciding in May 2021 to pause the ratification of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment—a pact, over seven years in the making, that was poised to cross the finish line when the Biden administration took office—and, this January, bringing a case against China at the World Trade Organization. An April 2022 joint EU-China summit, the first in nearly two years, was a brief affair that betrayed the bloc’s growing misgivings about Beijing; European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated afterward that the two sides had “exchanged very clearly opposing views” on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and warned that any Chinese assistance that enables Russia to continue its assault “would lead to a major reputational damage for China here in Europe.”

China may well possess the world’s largest economy within the next fifteen years, but it will struggle to achieve regional dominance, let alone global preeminence, if it cannot restore a baseline of trust with the advanced industrial democracies in its neighborhood and further afield, which still collectively wield the balance of global power.

And what of the entente between Russia and China? There are many indications, of course, that it is proceeding apace. In their much-discussed February 4, 2022 joint statement, they observed that their relationship has “no limits.” Russia has signed a 30-year contract to sell roughly 50 billion cubic meters of liquid natural gas to China annually through a new pipeline, the Power of Siberia 2, that is slated to begin operations in 2030. And while lamenting the deteriorating humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, China has refused to condemn Russia, focusing instead on the need to consider the latter’s proposals for Europe’s security architecture, such as Russia’s December 2021 demands that
NATO pledge to refrain from further expansion and remove troops and weapons deployed to countries that joined the alliance after 1997.

There are signs, however, that the Russia-China relationship is more strained than either country would care to admit. For starters, while China would like to reduce India’s influence in Central Asia, Russia believes that greater security coordination between Moscow and Delhi will be important in the aftermath of America’s withdrawal from Afghanistan. The sanctions that the West has levied against Russia in recent months have made it even more urgent for Moscow to strengthen its ties with Delhi, which remains a major buyer of Russian arms and oil. In addition, while China had regarded Russia as a generally useful partner prior to the latter’s invasion of Ukraine, if prone to shortsighted adventurism, some prominent Chinese observers fear that Russia’s aggression is undermining China’s national interests—not only by inflicting further damage on a global economy that has yet to recover from pandemic-induced disruptions, but also by stimulating further military, economic, and diplomatic coordination between advanced industrial democracies.9

It seems increasingly apparent in retrospect that prior to the invasion, China had rendered one of two judgments: that Russia was indeed going to conduct a mere “special military operation”—as opposed to a full-fledged invasion—or that, if Russia did invade, Moscow would secure Kyiv’s acquiescence quickly. The longer the conflict persists, the greater the opprobrium China will incur by association. Even as China joins Russia in opposing NATO’s expansion, calling for a less dollar-centric global financial architecture, and inveighing against other manifestations of US influence, it recognizes that its relations with the West will be more consequential to its long-term strategic outlook than its relations with Russia.10

### Between Defensiveness and Hubris

The good news, then, is that Russia and China are manageable competitors: the United States should neither underestimate nor aggrandize them. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, however, will test its capacity for equanimity: will Washington assess that it should apply its power more forcefully or instead conclude that it should concede its limits more candidly?

If one believes that Russia invaded Ukraine on account of US weakness and fears that China will consequently be emboldened to make a move on Taiwan, one might counsel the United States to offset its supposed display of pusillanimity with a bold projection of resolve, perhaps by embarking on a course of dual containment. That response would likely strengthen the Sino-Russian entente; disconcert allies and partners that seek to avoid an indefinite, expansive struggle.
against Moscow and (especially) Beijing; and draw Washington into peripheral contests around the globe where its vital national interests are not strongly implicated.

If defensiveness is one risk, hubris is paradoxically another: given how extraordinary an act of strategic self-sabotage Russia has committed with its invasion of Ukraine, Washington may feel tempted to conclude that Moscow has consigned itself to pariah status, and that Beijing is increasingly doing so by virtue of association. Many exhortations to pursue a foreign policy that is grounded in great-power competition recall America’s triumphalism following the Cold War. In retrospect, Washington underestimated the extent to which authoritarian countries, especially Russia and China, would be able and willing to contest the post-Cold War settlement. The United States must guard against hubris once more.

It seems unlikely that Moscow and Beijing will prove capable of overturning the present order, largely owing to the strategic roadblocks that they have placed along their own respective paths—roadblocks that enable Washington to enhance its freedom of foreign policy maneuver. But Russia and China cannot be readily marginalized or placed in strategic quarantine. It would accordingly be imprudent to predicate US foreign policy on the goal of those two countries’ eventual capitulation—more an impassioned declaration than a realistic objective—and attendant detachment from the core of geopolitics. Given that Iran, with a GDP less than one-sixth as large as Russia’s, and North Korea, with one of the world’s most impoverished economies, have both managed to endure significant and sustained external economic pressure, Russia will likely do so as well, with far more options for offsetting the impact of sanctions. China, meanwhile, with a GDP nearly ten times as large as Russia’s and with a far more commanding position in global supply chains, is even less likely to wither.¹¹

Their resilience undercuts an emerging narrative that stipulates an increasingly unified, confident set of democracies against an increasingly embittered, vilified Russia-China authoritarian axis. India, the world’s largest democracy, has been reluctant to jeopardize its relations with Russia, and it is contemplating the establishment of a rupee-ruble exchange to facilitate oil purchases. And Delhi is not alone; the vast majority of the world’s countries have declined to sanction Russia. In addition, while Russia’s invasion of Ukraine may intensify efforts on the part of advanced industrial democracies to reduce their economic entanglement with China, it will take time for such efforts to bear fruit. For now, at least, the rhetoric around decoupling outpaces the reality. Two-way goods trade between the United States and China

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was roughly $100 billion larger in 2021 than it was in 2019. The Peterson Institute for International Economics reports, meanwhile, that foreign direct investment into China reached a record high of $334 billion last year.

The long time horizon associated with economic diversification away from China points to a broader temporal point: short-term geopolitical realignments induced by systemic shocks may not calcify into long-term geopolitical patterns. The Biden administration has made clear that it intends to prioritize the Indo-Pacific. The release of its strategy for the region, which was unveiled on February 11, was overshadowed by escalating tensions in Eastern Europe, and Russia’s invasion understandably delayed the publication of the administration’s NDS (a classified version of which the Pentagon transmitted to Congress on March 28) and its NSS, which is forthcoming. Still, though, while Moscow’s aggression has spurred a concentrated short-term transatlantic focus on bolstering Europe’s security and dissuading further Russian revanchism, it may not yield longer-term strategic coalescence: security threats and geographic considerations will necessarily compel Europe to focus more on Russia, but the United States will wish to resume its focus on China.

Indeed, a declassified fact sheet on the NDS makes clear that China will still be the Pentagon’s top focus, calling it “our most consequential strategic competitor and the pacing challenge.” It adds that the Pentagon’s third priority will be “deterring aggression, while being prepared to prevail in conflict when necessary, prioritizing the [China] challenge in the Indo-Pacific, then the Russia challenge in Europe.” While the NSS has not been released, it will reflect this hierarchy as well since the NDS flows from the NSS. A fundamental divergence between Washington and Brussels’s strategic priorities casts doubt on the viability of a strategy that aims to forge a united front against Russia and China.

There are at least two other reasons why the United States should eschew triumphalism in its interactions with those two countries, even as it seeks to avoid descending once more into fatalism. First, and most obviously, its strategic outlook is not as auspicious as it was at the turn of the 21st century. Its relative influence, though formidable, continues to decline. Allies and partners must weigh the possibility that the United States will reelect Donald Trump in 2024 or elect someone who hews to his “America First” brand of unilateral transnationalism. That many other advanced industrial democracies have joined the United States in countering Russian aggression and Chinese coercion does not necessarily mean that they will fully support US foreign policy efforts. And the example of America’s enormous financial power, demonstrated anew in response to Russian aggression, will further compel its competitors and friends alike to determine how they can circumvent the dollar.

Second, the imperatives of long-term coexistence militate against the pursuit of decisive victory. An indefinite deterioration of relations with Russia and
China would raise the prospect of an armed confrontation, the avoidance of which remains the most solemn objective of great-power relations. Nuclear modernization, the development of hypersonic weapons, and advancements in artificial intelligence all make that prospect increasingly sobering. COVID-19 is far from over, as the spread of the BA.2.12.1, BA.4, and BA.5 subvariants demonstrates. It has claimed the lives of over one million Americans, roughly 350,000 more than the number of Americans who died in battle in US wars between 1775 and 1991. Epidemiologists believe that accelerating urbanization and deforestation will make pandemics more frequent. Climate change, meanwhile, continues its relentless march, and the edifice of arms control is crumbling.

It may be emotionally appealing to declare that the United States should—and can—manage such challenges solely alongside countries with which it is ideologically aligned, especially in view of the horrors that Russia is inflicting on Ukraine and the worsening human rights abuses landscape inside China. But the suggestion is prescriptively misguided: a scenario in which Washington believes that it can no longer engage in cooperative pursuits with Moscow and Beijing—or worse, frames such pursuits as strategic concessions to authoritarian challengers—would undercut US national interests. As challenging as it will prove for the United States to cohabitate with Russia and China over the long term, those two countries could prove more destabilizing over time if they feel a steadily diminishing investment in the current order.

**Informing a More Sustainable US Foreign Policy**

The growing coalescence around great-power competition as an orienting framework for US foreign policy suggests that it will be difficult to overcome the strategic inertia that accumulated between the late 1930s and the end of the Cold War. Indeed, one of America’s greatest missed opportunities of the post-Cold War period has been to develop a foreign policy that does not require an overarching challenger to justify and sustain it.

In the 1990s, the United States debated just what to do with its extraordinary inheritance of power. Counterterrorism provided a ballast for much of the 2000s, but a partial one at best; as the decade drew to a close, a growing number of policymakers expressed concern that US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were preventing Washington from paying attention and adapting to the shifting balance of power, especially as manifest in a resurgent Asia. The Obama administration attempted to reorient US foreign policy eastward, but revolution in the Middle East and upheaval in Eastern Europe stymied its initiative. All
throughout, many observers concluded that the United States would remain rud-
derless without an external competitor to define its foreign policy.

Kennan presciently anticipated that the United States would struggle to find
its strategic footing after the Cold War: in early 1994, when an understandable (if
premature) exuberance infused much US commentary, he observed that the
United States had won something of a Pyrrhic victory against the Soviet
Union, for the implosion of its erstwhile antagonist had also deprived US
foreign policy of its longstanding ballast. Framing Washington’s struggle
against Moscow as part of a larger arc, extending back to its confrontations
with Japan and Germany during World War II, he warned that the United
States was “unaccustomed to reacting to a world situation that offers no such
great and all-absorbing focal points for American policy” and explained that it
would understandably seek “some sort of a single grand strategy of foreign
policy, to replace our fixation on the Soviet Union.”

Three decades after the Cold War’s conclusion, Russia’s irredentism and
China’s resurgence would seem to furnish the strategic clarity for which the
United States has been searching: two formidable nation-state competitors chal-
lenge the values that it promulgates and the order that it underpins. But it would
be unwise for Washington to embark on a poorly defined, continuously expand-
ing struggle, not only because it would be unlikely to find widespread support for
such an undertaking—either at home or abroad—but also because the realities of
interdependence will not permit it to advance its national interests in isolation
from Moscow and Beijing. America’s core challenge—and opportunity—is to for-
mulate a foreign policy that can endure no matter what steps they take. Here are
ten questions that US officials might ask to that end:

1. Over what—and for what—is the United States competing?
2. If one were to reject the proposition that the United States should contest
Russia and China ubiquitously, and instead argue that it should adopt a
“zero-based” approach to strategic competition, to which geographic and
functional competitions would one recommend that it accord top priority?
3. Given the difficulty of conceptualizing what “victories” over Russia and
China would entail, how should the United States gauge whether it is regis-
tering competitive success?
4. Recognizing both the inevitability of intensifying competition and the
imperative of durable cohabitation with Russia and China, how can the
United States preserve a baseline of cooperative space with both countries?
In what domains would limited cooperation be most feasible?
5. What activities, arrangements, and understandings would be necessary to
sustain stable US relationships with Russia and China?
6. Beyond the mitigation of strategic frictions with Russia and China, what tasks should define America’s engagement with its core allies and partners?

7. How should the United States engage with countries in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia, which largely share the determination to ensure that great-power competition neither erodes their strategic agency nor defines their national interests?

8. What steps can the United States take to minimize the impact of great-power competition on the management of transnational challenges?

9. How fully can the United States articulate its vision for a more resilient postwar order without invoking Russia and China? What should the pillars of that vision be?

10. If one believes that domestic renewal is a precondition for external competitiveness, how can the United States address its socioeconomic difficulties more effectively and enhance its resilience against transnational challenges amid growing ideological tribalism and political dysfunction?

The United States cannot—and, more importantly, should not—rely on Russia and China to impart strategic clarity to its foreign policy. It should focus instead on renewing its unique competitive advantages, propounding a conception of geopolitics that speaks more to its aspirations than to its anxieties.

Notes


5. Valentina Pop, Sam Fleming, and James Politi, “Weaponization of finance: how the West unleashed ‘shock and awe’ on Russia,” Financial Times, April 6, 2022, https://www.ft.com/content/5b397d6b-bde4-4a8c-b9a4-080485d6c64a.


