

All material compiled from open-source documents.

**America's Security Strategy and Collective National Identities:
Transitioning Away from a Competitive Framework**

Kyle M. Schoonover

Captain, United States Air Force

Advisor: Boris Shif

Lieutenant Colonel, United States Air Force

Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for

**AIR UNIVERSITY ADVANCED RESEARCH PROGRAM
NEXT GENERATION INTELLIGENCE, SURVEILLANCE, AND RECONNAISSANCE**

In part of

SQUADRON OFFICER SCHOOL

IN RESIDENCE

CLASS 21F

AIR UNIVERSITY

MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE

August 2021

Disclaimer: "Opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Air University, the United States Air Force, the Department of Defense, or any other US Government agency."

General Audience Abstract

America's national security strategy is experiencing an identity crisis. Indeed, this crisis has existed to some extent since the fall of the Soviet Union. America's moment of unipolarity is rapidly drawing to a close while senior civilian and military leaders alike prepare for the return of great power competition. Despite its swift progression from arcane obscurity to the cornerstone of America's strategic lexicon, "great power competition" remains dangerously vague, undefined, and misunderstood. There is an endemic assumption amongst military leaders that great power competition *is* the strategy, and as a result, the term will begin to supplant the equally ill-conceived "global war on terror" as the focus of operational and tactical decision-making. Through an analysis of the modern great power environment, one can see how China and Russia began championing revanchist and restorative narratives to justify the employment of affective geopolitics over the last few decades. The successful weaponization of state-propagated collective national identities by our peer adversaries will be the defining feature of the coming global environment and makes the premise of "great power competition" as a grand strategy an unsustainable endeavor. Instead, I offer an alternative, defined, and tangible grand strategic approach to multipolarity – which I call great power management – giving military leaders a stronger foundation for decision-making. Great power management takes three primary forms: managing ascensions, managing alliances, and managing ambitions. These "Three A's" will be detailed herein, with actionable operational and tactical suggestions for engagement with China and Russia. We must have a military strategy and foreign policy congruent with our adversaries' affective reality, not ones predicated on our recollection of the Cold War environment. This is the only way to align all instruments of national power at American disposal. It is time for America's national security strategy to find its post-Cold War identity, starting by understanding those of our global challengers.

The National Security Strategy of 2017 ushered in a new epoch of American foreign policy. “After being dismissed as a phenomenon of an earlier century, great power competition returned”¹ to supplant “the global war on terrorism” as the new primary concern for the United States within the international community. Unfortunately, in their haste to address what they considered American “strategic atrophy” since the end of the Cold War, the national security apparatus unwittingly exchanged one ill-conceived grand strategy for another. There are several fundamental flaws in using great power competition as a strategy. It is woefully undefined: who exactly we are competing with, what realms we are competing in, and – most importantly – what does the end-state of this competition look like? These are critical questions that have remained precariously open to interpretation. Additionally, a focus on “great powers” alone places our smaller strategic partners – Brazil and India, for example – on the periphery. “America’s quintessential advantage is its global network of alliances and partnerships; focusing on ‘great powers’ [potentially] minimizes the role of these countries.”² Finally, framing the international community as a competitive arena will ultimately erase opportunities for strategic cooperation between the United States and our nearest peers: China and Russia. There is a pervasive misconception within American strategic circles that the modern multipolar environment is the same as the Cold War international community. While the driving force behind our peers’ foreign policy – the Party – has essentially remained constant, both Russia and China have become adept at mobilizing their populations behind a newfound collective identity predicated on a narrative of national humiliation. As a result, competition is no longer solely defined by the

¹ “National Security Strategy [December 2017].” Homeland Security Digital Library. United States. White House Office, December 1, 2017. <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=806478>.

² Cooper, Zach. “Bad Idea: ‘Great Power Competition Terminology.’” The Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 17, 2020. <https://defense360.csis.org/bad-idea-great-power-competition-terminology/>.

dichotomous relationship between democracy and authoritarianism, i.e., government versus government. Our foreign policy strategy must reflect an appreciation for these civilian centers of gravity, which can easily be activated when threatened by a preoccupation with international competition. By first understanding these new collective identities, a more tangible strategy – great power management³ – for modern multipolarity may be adopted.

China’s “Century of National Humiliation” is widely understood as the period between the Opium Wars of the 19th Century and the end of World War Two. What is perhaps less understood is how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has weaponized this memory to stoke nationalistic sentiment in the general population. This identity formation was expedited by the Chinese government in 1990s in the wake the Tiananmen Square protests. “With the decline of Communist ideology as a source of legitimacy, CCP leaders realized that history education on national humiliation was an effective device for the regime to legitimize its rule, [and] national humiliation discourse thus was revived in the service of patriotic education.”⁴ Soon afterwards, “National Humiliation Education” became a core tenet of Chinese domestic policy, as textbooks and maps were published and implemented in the school systems, designed to remind the nation of past defeats, conquests, and subjugations. The CCP was desperate “to shift the focus of youthful energies away from domestic issues to foreign problems” by evoking a collective sense of national humiliation and dismemberment at the hands of imperial foreign barbarians.⁵

³ This is not to be confused with Hedley Bull’s great power management from the English School of IR Theory, which contends that a minority of states holding the majority of world power will organize to administer global peace and security.

⁴ Wang, Zheng. “National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China.” *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2008): 789.

⁵ Callahan, William A. *China: The Pessimist Nation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 820.

There are two very clear examples of national humiliation being a mobilizing agent in China since the Tiananmen Square protests produced patriotic education policies. The accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by NATO forces in 1999, very understandably, resulted in widespread, anti-Western protests throughout mainland China. Furthermore, in 2001, an American EP-3 reconnaissance plane and a People's Liberation Army fighter jet collided over Hainan, resulting in the death of a Chinese pilot. The incident resulted in the American crew being detained and more Chinese protests because the reconnaissance plane was operating near the Paracel Islands, territorially claimed by Beijing. "To Beijing, it was much more than simple violation of Chinese sovereignty: It was seen as a moral problem, another in a long line of humiliations that China has suffered since the Opium Wars."⁶ It is easy to understand why these events sparked demonstrations by the general Chinese public. However, the establishment of two new "Days of National Humiliation" *commemorating* these incidents speaks volumes to the discursive power of the Chinese collective identity. "[This] discourse takes many forms: public histories, textbooks, museums, mass movements, romance novels, popular songs, prose poems, feature films, national holidays, and atlases."⁷ Regardless of the form, however, the CCP has been extraordinarily successful at manipulating the population through a discourse of humiliation, and their control of the national identity is continuing to rise. "In China, nationalist voices critical of myriad aspects of U.S. policy are on the rise, mostly notably with the emergence of caustic statements from Chinese diplomats in a phenomenon known as wolf warrior diplomacy."⁸

⁶ Callahan, William A. "National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism." *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 29, no. 2 (2004): 202.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁸ Medeiros, Evan S. "The Changing Context of Great Power Competition." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2021, 7.

Perhaps inspired by the success of the Chinese model, Vladimir Putin came to power in the late 1990's espousing similar themes. In fact, Putin frames the collapse of the Soviet Union as the greatest humiliation for Russia due to the fragmentation of the Russian people. In his words, "tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory," stranded in the Donbas, Crimea, Ossetia, and many other locations.⁹ Under the guise of this shared understanding of the Russian people, Putin was able to advance a narrative of himself as the protector of Russians in the near abroad, dedicated to defending them whenever and however necessary. As a result, "Putin's government has been restoring a Soviet-style patriotic education in order to nurture Russia's wounded self-esteem after the dramatic political change"¹⁰ of the early 1990s.

Another powerful component of Russia's identity-formation has been the habitual conflict between the East and West, exacerbated by the expansion of NATO into the former Soviet bloc. "Russia became particularly insulted due to the decision of a number of former Soviet republics or 'allies' in Eastern Europe to join NATO and the EU and due to U.S. support of pro-Western governments in countries such as Georgia and Ukraine."¹¹ Putin has often framed NATO expansion in terms reminiscent of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, conveying a sense of humiliation to the Russian people yet again. In fact, he was able to capitalize on this humiliation as justification for the invasion of South Ossetia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. In a speech to the Russian State Duma, Putin remarked that "in people's hearts and minds, Crimea

⁹ Toal, Gerard. *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and Caucasus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 55.

¹⁰ Wang, "National Humiliation," 787.

¹¹ Matsaberidze, David. "Russia vs. EU/US through Georgia and Ukraine." *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 14, no. 2 (2015): 80.

has always been an inseparable part of Russia.”¹² This sentiment received thunderous applause, and Putin received a noticeable spike in approval rating in the immediate aftermath of his actions. These were not merely aggressive policies in the eyes of the Russian collective identity, but necessary restorative efforts for the greater Russian world in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse. He continued: “millions of people went to bed in one country and awoke in different ones, overnight becoming ethnic minorities in former Union republics, while the Russian nation became one of the biggest, if not the biggest ethnic group in the world to be divided by borders.”¹³ This mentality forms the cornerstone of Russian restorative agendas and aggressive foreign policies.

With a better understanding of our peers’ collective identities – and how the state mobilizes those identities – perhaps one can start to appreciate why “great power competition” as a grand strategy is such an intangible pursuit. Not because competition is a useless endeavor – on the contrary, competition is what got the United States from a man in space to a man on the moon in just eight years. Rather, a focus on competition alone directly incites both Russian and Chinese identities which the controlling parties have gone to great lengths to weaponize on their behalf. This is *fundamentally* different from the Cold War era, where the policy of “collectivism” was never truly designed nor capable of mobilizing the proletariat. Acting solely through a competitive agenda eliminates room for cooperative growth, mobilizes our peers’ governments and societies against us, and offers no framework through which military leaders can make decisions to achieve desired end-states. To rectify these shortcomings, proposed herein is an alternative strategy to “great power competition:” great power management.

¹² Toal, *Near Abroad*, 227.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 228.

Great power management takes three primary forms, all of which offer a frame of reference for operational and tactical decision making. First, managing the ascension of other countries to either near-peer or peer status should be the primary goal of our multilateral relations. Second, managing alliances remains the key to ensuring American access to global markets and crucial to rebalancing the international order in America's favor. Finally, managing the ambitions of growing powers is imperative to guaranteeing comprehensive peace and security long into the future. It is this third category where great power competition is meant to reside, as a tool to achieve the grand strategy of great power management. These "Three A's" – ascensions, alliances, and ambitions – provide a more promising framework through which to engage our peers: by managing, not solely competing with, Chinese and Russian collective identities and the parties which employ them.

The overwhelming majority of America's fighting force was not alive the last time the world was multipolar. As a result, it may be tempting to view the current environment through a similar lens – recency bias, perhaps. "The new conflict will not pit one 'ism' against another, nor will it likely unfold under the permanent threat of nuclear Armageddon," and "significant regions and key players...will avoid being drawn in" to potential conflicts.¹⁴ "In this context, major power competition manifests less as behaviors, such as territorial conquest and major power war, and more as the accretion of political, economic, military, diplomatic, and cultural influence and often the coercive application of such influence for geopolitical gain."¹⁵ The modern great power era is not the same as the last one, and it would be a mistake to pursue Cold War-era policies alone. The most common system of government is now democratic liberalism in its various

¹⁴ Legvold, Robert. "Managing the New Cold War: What Moscow and Washington Can Learn from the Last One." *Council on Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 4 (July 2014). 75.

¹⁵ Medeiros, "The Changing Context of Great Power Competition," 4.

forms, and the ascensions of new powers ought to ensure this does not change. Unfortunately, we have already missed our opportunity to manage the rise of China and Russia, who remain committed to offering authoritarian capitalism as an alternative model for the rise to prosperity. To counteract this development, the United States military should remain committed to multilateral engagement with other rising powers who will help maintain the global dominance of democratic ideals. This tenet is at the heart of the management of ascensions. Brazil and India offer promising pursuits to this end, as they are currently growing in power and are still relatively impressionable. Military support may be more concertedly shifted towards these states, and the Department of Defense can further incentivize members – money, promotions, travel – to learn the languages of rising states to encourage cooperation.

Further, it is worth noting that the United States has a wide array of policy options when managing the ascensions of new world powers. In fact, political scientist Randall Schweller identified six: preventive war, balancing, bandwagoning, binding, engagements, and distancing/buckpassing.¹⁶ Now, the goal of any American strategy ought to be the avoidance of armed conflict, so preventive war will not be discussed. Balancing (forming alliances to counteract the rising state) and bandwagoning (seeking alliances *with* the rising state) fall squarely into the management of alliances. Binding is a policy strategy in which “states forgo a counter-alliance against a threatening state, which they fear may provoke greater conflict and perhaps war, and instead ally with the rival for the purpose of managing the threat by means of a pact of restraint.”¹⁷ Mutually assured destruction and conventional deterrence come to mind here, which will be discussed in terms of managing ambitions. Buckpassing – which is very

¹⁶ Schweller, Randall. “Engaging China: The Management of an Emerging Power.” *An American Grand Strategy for the Age of Disorder*, 1999, 7-8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

much what it sounds like – would likely be too difficult and dangerous of a role for the United States to assume in the modern global environment. Engagement, however, is an excellent policy strategy that the United States can employ in the management of ascensions with the end-state of maintaining the status quo.

Engagement “encompasses any attempt to socialize the dissatisfied power into acceptance of the established order,” and “it relies on the promise of rewards rather than the threat of punishment to influence the target’s behavior.”¹⁸ The end-state here is to ensure the rising power retains a vested interest in the stability of the current order. “The most common form of engagement is the policy of appeasement, which attempts to settle international quarrels ‘by admitting and satisfying grievances through rational negotiation and compromise. Typically, this process requires adjustments in territory and ‘spheres of influence’ and the reallocation of global responsibilities and other sources of prestige commensurate with the growth in power of the rising state.”¹⁹ It is important to note that engagement is not an appropriate strategy for all rising powers, particularly those who are truly revolutionary in purpose. It could be effective towards more limited-aims revisionist powers; however, this would truly require a whole-of-government approach, utilizing all instruments of American power. Military engagement is only feasible after the diplomatic, economic, and information realms have paved the way. What the military *can* do, however, is avoid exacerbating any existing territorial disputes occurring within the rising powers. The United States military would not, for example, engage with Pakistan in Kashmir, causing undue strain on Indo-American relations.²⁰ Reassuring ascending powers that

¹⁸ Ibid., 14.

¹⁹ Ibid., 14.

²⁰ This is an intentionally obvious and generic example, but the theory is meant to apply to future powers which we have not yet identified.

they will be allowed to handle territorial adjustments within their immediate sphere of influence will be a general first step towards the preservation of the status quo.

Alliances remain America's competitive advantage against Russia and China, and the management of such alliances ought to be a top priority of American military strategy. Bandwagoning and balancing are two policy options that the United States will have at its disposal to this end. In terms of the current great power community, managing alliances should take two forms: the preservation of existent alliances against our revolutionary peers (balancing) and the prevention of a Sino-Russian counter-alliance. To promote Chinese containment, "the U.S. has been coaxing India, Vietnam, and other Southeast Asian partners into a system of alliances centered on Japan, Australia, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines."²¹ It is crucial that such efforts continue. In terms of military strategy towards Russia, the United States can ease tensions and introduce a wedge between Russia and China simultaneously through our management of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Military engagement with current NATO allies should continue, as it is one of our most effective tools at dissuading Russian aggression. "Treaty commitments are sacrosanct, [and] one of the pillars of a rules-based system is for nations to live by their commitments."²² As a result, Article 5 of NATO's charter remains an incredibly powerful deterrent.

That being said, America can also manage NATO to prevent the further alignment of China and Russia. There has been a lot of criticism from national security experts concerning the plausibility of such a scenario, but others acknowledge the grave risk that such a development poses. "In 2016, former U.S. national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski warned that 'the

²¹ Crawford, Timothy W. *Power to Divide*. Cornell University Press, 2021. 193.

²² Kupchan, Charles A. "On Great Power Conflict: Entangled or Untangled Alliances?" *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (2019). 4

most dangerous' future threat to U.S. security would be 'a grand coalition of China and Russia' conjoined 'by complementary grievances.'"²³ American power and the network of alliances used to project that power are at the heart of Sino-Russian complementary grievances. As a result, selective accommodation towards Russia may be an effective option to counteract these complaints. In his new book, Timothy Crawford defines the strategy of "selective accommodation" as "the use of positive incentives to create divergent pressures on members or potential members of an opposing alliance."²⁴ It is important to note here that there does not need to be strong existing alliance to employ wedge strategies against Russia and China; it can be a preventive tool. A critical effort in selective accommodation towards Russia would be the termination of NATO enlargement into the post-Soviet bloc, and a commitment to reject future membership action plans. This would serve two purposes. First, it would appease the Russian collective identity which is primed to fear NATO and the West, a fear that Putin capitalized on to invade Ukraine and Georgia. Secondly, it would bring American strategic goals in line with our most powerful NATO allies (Germany, England, etc.) who have already opposed the inclusion of states like Georgia and Ukraine into the alliance. Such a move could potentially reduce friction between America and Russia, while also removing a "unifying factor in cooperation between Russia and China" and 'allow the forces of Russian-Chinese rivalry for Central Asian influence gradually to re-emerge.'"²⁵ This seems particularly relevant in the modern context of America's withdrawal from Afghanistan, which will undoubtedly leave a soft and hard-power gap over which Russia and China can compete.

²³ Crawford, *The Power to Divide*, 192.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 202.

Finally, managing the ambitions of fellow powers is critical to staving off great conflict, and is the category to which great power competition rightfully belongs. Understanding the ambitions of our peers is the first step. Being able to categorize dissatisfied states as either revolutionaries or limited-aims revisionists will determine how we approach great power management on a case-by-case basis. In the current context, Russia seeks to rewrite the established world order, a right that they have argued for since World War Two. From their perspective, “Russia paid for this right seventy-five years ago with millions of lives, but both international and domestic systems hampered further Russian success. Today, Russia should once again attempt to shape a new world order, but at a lower cost and with greater benefits.”²⁶ China, on the other hand, intends to replace the United States atop the current structure. As Professor Wu Xinbo of Fudan University writes, “China does not pose an existential threat to the United States, yet it does threaten to dilute U.S. hegemony, share its global leadership role, and demonstrate an alternative to its development and governance model.”²⁷ Conventional deterrence theories are still effective management tools against such ambitions, but the application of these theories has changed significantly from Cold War mentalities. “In other words, while the requirements of deterrence may be little changed, past formulations of conventional deterrence objectives, focusing on large ground armies facing each other across a central front, may become increasingly irrelevant.”²⁸ The military must balance traditional military strength with innovation in areas of modern unconventional warfare: space, cyberspace, artificial intelligence, and

²⁶ Karaganov, Sergey, and Dmitry Suslov. “A New World Order: A View from Russia.” *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development* 13 (2019): 93.

²⁷ Medeiros, “The Changing Context of Great Power Competition,” 7.

²⁸ Haffa Jr., Robert P. “The Future of Conventional Deterrence: Strategies for Great Power Competition.” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (2018). 100.

cryptocurrencies to name a few. Potential for armed conflict still exists, however, particularly over Taiwanese independence and the Arctic, based on the ambitions of China and Russia respectively. As a result, the military ought to continue planning and executing short-notice exercises designed to respond to such threats. U.S. Northern Command's "Arctic Edge" exercise in Alaska is a perfect example of training for arctic combat, but should be extended to our combined partners within the appropriate contested sphere of influence.

Pursuing great power competition as national strategy risks rushing into a conflict for which we are unprepared, against adversaries which we do not understand, striving for end-states that we have not properly defined. The United States may very well trade a hot "forever war" with a cold one, where resources and lives are invested in an unattainable objective.

Policymakers owe the American military a more coherent and defined national strategy – one which does not play against the narratives of collective national identities or the insecurities of our peers. Great power management offers an easily digestible framework through which military leaders can align their decisions with the other instruments of national power. In many ways, America missed its opportunity to manage Russian and Chinese power, which is why we find ourselves resorting to competition. The second wave of great power ascensions – and a second wave is surely coming – will play a critical role in ensuring the continued dominance of the democratic liberalist ideology. Great power management will allow the United States to maintain its role as the leader of the global order even amidst a relative decline in power, all while enabling strategic cooperation with our more authoritarian peers. If we accept that conflict in the modern era may not have the same characteristics as the traditional picture of conventional forces; if policymakers decide that we are past the point of power management; if no other

strategic course of action exists other than competition, then maybe America needs to consider the possibility that we have already fallen into Thucydides' Trap.²⁹

²⁹ Graham Allison defined Thucydides' Trap as the tendency for world powers to go to war with rising powers who challenge their global or regional hegemony. The term is taken from Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, in which he asserted that the conflict was caused by Athen's relative rise in power, and the fear that rise created in Sparta. To learn more, see *Destined for War* (Allison 2017).

Bibliography

- Allison, Graham Tillet. *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2017.
- Callahan, William A. *China: The Pessoptimist Nation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- . "National Insecurities: Humiliation, Salvation, and Chinese Nationalism." *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 29, no. 2 (2004): 199–218.
- Cooper, Zach. "Bad Idea: 'Great Power Competition Terminology.'" The Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 17, 2020. <https://defense360.csis.org/bad-idea-great-power-competition-terminology/>.
- Crawford, Timothy W. *Power to Divide*. Cornell University Press, 2021.
- Haffa Jr., Robert P. "The Future of Conventional Deterrence: Strategies for Great Power Competition." *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (2018).
- Karaganov, Sergey, and Dmitry Suslov. "A New World Order: A View from Russia." *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development* 13 (2019): 72–95.
- Kupchan, Charles A. "On Great Power Conflict: Entangled or Untangled Alliances?" *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (2019).
- Legvold, Robert. "Managing the New Cold War: What Moscow and Washington Can Learn from the Last One." *Council on Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 4 (July 2014).
- Medeiros, Evan S. "The Changing Context of Great Power Competition." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 2021, 4–9.
- Matsaberidze, David. "Russia vs. EU/US through Georgia and Ukraine." *Connections: The Quarterly Journal* 14, no. 2 (2015): 77–86.
- "National Security Strategy [December 2017]." Homeland Security Digital Library. United States. White House Office, December 1, 2017. <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=806478>.
- Schweller, Randall. "Engaging China: The Management of an Emerging Power." *An American Grand Strategy for the Age of Disorder*, 1999, 1–31.
- Toal, Gerard. *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and Caucasus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Wang, Zheng. "National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China." *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (2008): 783–806.