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A Twenty-First-Century Strategy to Counter Russia, China, and Iran



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It is clear that the U.S. strategy of being a guarantor of the world order is at a point where the costs are higher than the benefits. A policy of cascading realism allows multiple poles of global power and interests, which might

accommodate the needs of more powers than the current state of global affairs.

by Sorin Adam Matei

Russia's saber-rattling around Ukraine and its demand that NATO return to its 1997 borders at least *de facto* if not *de jure* took the world by surprise. Even more surprising will be the People's Republic of China's final moves toward subduing, if not annexing Taiwan, which has become increasingly likely, at least according to a former commander of United States Indo-Pacific Command. These two developments mark the end of a long period of competition and conflict in world affairs. In fact, conflict between the United States, China, and Russia has been brewing for some time, despite that the United States has preferred to treat it as competition. A new approach is needed, which I call "cascading realism," by which conflict is not avoided or wished away, but confronted in a flexible manner, relying on allies and measured yet forceful responses. This strategic response is urgent, as the world seems to be spiraling towards a situation, not unlike that preceding World War II, in which great powers aim to reshape the world order and hierarchy of power.

The not-so-thinly veiled war threats issued by Russia since the fall of 2021 have alluded to nuclear conflict. Russia's takeover of Crimea, complemented by the gray zone conflict in Ukraine, is the product of force. Russia is in a latent conflict with the West. However, Russia's moves should not be seen as isolated developments. They mark a major turn in world affairs in which greater and lesser powers have engaged in conflict, including China, which annexed the South China Sea. Iran, too, has been openly attacking ships transiting the Persian Gulf, including one that killed a British and a Romanian, both citizens of NATO countries. Local conflicts affecting NATO and Western interests flare up frequently even if the media pays little attention to them.

The real problem with these developments is that they have been mistakenly seen in the United States in competitive terms. In fact, they are blooming conflicts. Until now,

the solution has been either to engage in full-out conflict or to play the competitive game the same way the adversary does, namely, as a conflict with non-reversible outcomes. The United States proposes the latter, although in a manner that is different than that adopted by its adversaries. Instead, the United States needs to show flexible resolve exercised through a new type of realism, in which its voice should not be diluted but propagated through its partners. America should confront aggressive takeovers and encroachment with immediate responses while providing tangible means for de-escalation that satisfy both parties and international peace. At the same time, the United States needs to reaffirm its commitment to vital national interests while working with local leaders who should act in a similar manner in their own interest. By implementing cascading engagement and pushback mechanisms, the United States will avoid carrying the burden and paying the cost of being an international guarantor of world peace while harvesting little recognition or prestige from it.

While the world's attention has been focused on Russia and Ukraine, the real magnitude of the problem is much larger. In the name of an open competition for resources and access, China obtained in the South China Sea something that in the past would have resulted in a regional conflict: establishing military bases and exercising effective control over disputed territorial waters. Furthermore, the claims and strong points are already connected to a global network of mutually supportive strategic actions. The South China Sea outcome is the equivalent of a checkmate chess move. It was induced by cornering the queen, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Fleet in Southeast Asia. From now on, applying pressure elsewhere, such as Taiwan or North Korea, will always be more expensive, as the United States cannot use the South China Sea as a bargaining chip while simultaneously exposing its fleet to costly operations.

U.S. military planners and politicians are now left to determine what they did wrong. Worse, some are still trying to convince themselves, the world, and U.S. adversaries that their perception—"it is a mere competition, nothing was truly lost, there is still time"—is reality.

Competition, Conflict, and “Irreversible Competition”

First, it is necessary to distinguish competition from conflict. Competition and conflict differ in their dynamics and outcomes. Competition is continuous while conflicts are discrete. Competitions result in reversible outcomes, which are renegotiated from time to time to accommodate the actors. Conflicts result in non-reversible outcomes, whose status is expected to be permanent. The outcome of a conflict can only be undone by another conflict. While competition is an infinitely evolving non-zero-sum game, conflict is a series of zero-sum games that succeed in discrete episodes. The relative advantage of a competitive game is that a country can maintain and extend its gains in time without significant costs. The disadvantage of competition is that the gains are of relative value, incremental, small, and possibly reversible. The comparative advantages of a conflict are that it can bring great benefits, it ensures definitive outcomes, and it puts the adversary in an inferior position. The disadvantage is that conflict has high initial and final risks. In conflict, there is no such thing as a bit of a loss. Conflict breeds conflict, spiraling out of control. The benefits of conflict rarely exceed the costs.

Given this, a situation in which competitive behavior is pushed to the limit to generate greater outcomes was preferred by U.S. adversaries. One gets the cake (irreversible outcomes) and can eat it, too (the competition continues). This kind of “competitive conflict” or “irreversible competition” has been evident in three recent contexts: the South China Sea, Crimea, and Syria-Iraq. In each of these situations, the losses for the United States were significant and the product of several major strategic miscalculations. The fundamental one was, as stated, mistaking conflict for competition due to wishful thinking. Two other mistakes bred this error: inertial strategic thinking and the lack of criteria to determine if the United States is in a competition or conflict.

The South China Sea’s Never-Declared Conflict

The People’s Republic of China has claimed the entire South China Sea as a part of its territorial waters since 1949. For decades, this was one of the many disputed and

nominal claims made by the nations of the world over territories they aspired to control while doing nothing to achieve the goal. Thus, the Chinese claim to a border, called the “nine-dash” line, stretching as far as 1,000 miles from the coast of mainland China, was taken as another instrument in the global game of verbal and diplomatic competition. Everything changed in 2016 when China refused a decision of the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague which declared that Chinese claims lacked any basis in international law or historical rights. China’s refusal would have gone in the annals of diplomacy as another verbal repartee if it weren’t reinforced by more than just words. China has since established numerous naval installations in the claimed area. The Chinese coast guard and navy patrol the area as if it is part of its national territory, while Chinese air patrols are a nuisance for the naval forces of other world powers—such as those of the United States, United Kingdom, France, or India—undertaking freedom of navigation patrols of their own. As much as the world, especially the United States, disagrees with China’s claims, all is reduced to verbal protestations while China’s power projection assets are secure. China, in effect, has gotten what it wanted without firing a shot. How did the United States get to this point?

As far as the United States is concerned, its strategic leadership, especially during the Clinton, Bush, and Obama presidencies, underestimated China’s will and ability to enforce its verbal claims. The United States underestimated the scope and speed of technological capabilities while misunderstanding their true nature. Successful infrastructure and logistics operations catalyzed China’s desire and ability to create new weapons systems. This suggested from the very beginning that it was not a competition but a zero-sum conflict over the local maritime domain in the western Pacific. The South China Sea was not a mere local affair. It was connected to global ambitions, more recently to the trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative and the creation of a blue water navy almost as large as that of the U.S. Navy. By winning the South China Sea conflict, China won the first battle for wresting the control of, or at least limiting access to, the world ocean.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, China's claims and actions in the South China Sea were perceived as a mere competitive bid for regional leadership. Yet, the Chinese People's Liberation Army, Air Force, and Navy's static and mobile installations control all choke points using advanced information, sensing, and command and control networks that buttress operations and assets in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The United States thought it could play a competitive game by running "freedom of navigation" patrols. The truth was and is that unless these operations effectively deny the normal operations of the Chinese information and command and control networks, they remain merely tolerated activities, all bark with no teeth.

Meanwhile, China's military and civilian planners masterfully deflected the world's attention from the conflict's strategic dimension by coaching it as a mere competitive bid for resources similar to other disputes with Vietnam, Taiwan, and the Philippines. The massive build-up that turned twenty-eight submerged or barely noticeable sand bars and atolls into naval and air installations dwarves anything accomplished by the other nations in the region. Nevertheless, China pitched these exploits as attempts to "plant the flag" on deserted islands, not unlike what Taiwan, Vietnam, or the Philippines have done in the past with minimal impact on world affairs. Often, the installations were ostensibly maritime emergency supply points, fishing points, or weather stations. However, China quickly turned them into full-fledged military installations complete with missile batteries, barracks, hardened aircraft shelters, and even submarine pens. The bulk of the work was done between 1988 and 2016, at the cost of \$100 billion. Restoring one submerged reef, Fiery Cross, for human habitation cost \$11 billion—not including the cost of building infrastructure.

One of the most effective means China used to maintain the appearance of competition while hiding its conflictual nature was the simultaneous announcement of numerous technological advances, which kept deflecting U.S. planners' attention. The technological advances were used in part as red herrings. The tactic worked particularly well because the United States previously underestimated China's technological capabilities related to maritime infrastructure, command and control, and sensory networks.

In this respect, China exploited a vulnerability of the U.S. military and strategic establishment inherited from the Cold War, which understood peer competition as a one-dimensional technology-centric race. Having over-performed in traditional domains, such as naval and infrastructure development, Chinese planners kept upping the ante by announcing primary weapons systems that kept the United States on its toes and distracted from local strategic deployments of troops and installations. Nothing was more helpful for deflecting attention from the South China Sea than the announcements in quick succession of several programs. First, China ramped up its advanced destroyer and aircraft carrier programs. China is currently building at least two conventionally powered carriers and is planning a class of nuclear-powered alternatives. Then, a hypersonic missile was developed that could ostensibly hit U.S. carrier groups as far east as Hawaii. Finally, there was a rail gun's apparent, yet never verified, sea trials. Despite the falsifiable claims that a rail gun can currently be deployed or that hypersonic weapons can be on a scale and with a precision needed to do battle across the entire span of the Pacific, these announcements absorbed planning, resources, and even military deployments to a degree not justified by the potential outcome of what in effect is an arms race.

Second, and more importantly, China effectively hid its territorial seizures in the South China Sea by claiming minor local economic interests in the region. Claims to access local resources are a common political and diplomatic instrument to accommodate great powers. It is always easy for a great power to appear benevolent, even helpful, by giving a challenger what it already has. In this case, U.S. planners thought that allowing China to compete for fishing banks, gas, and oil resources in the South China Sea would not be unlike allowing Norway or the United Kingdom to drill in the North Sea. However, what U.S. strategic planners did not see, or preferred to ignore, was that small claims lead to more adventurous claims. The Chinese have advanced very quickly from local claims and enterprises to building a chain of military and economic strong points. To set in stone its claim to national sovereignty over the entire South China Sea, China extended its national border over 1,000 miles away from the mainland Chinese coast.

Finally, China's operations to enforce its claims in South China Sea resulted in a victory when China revealed the full scope of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Straddling every continent, the trillion-dollar investment project has suddenly revealed that as big and daring as the South China Sea build-up program was, it was only a distraction. The BRI is a network of naval and air installations composed of strategic dual-use infrastructure projects. It includes at least thirty civilian ports owned or operated by Chinese firms in over twenty countries. Up to two dozen airport projects are under construction or completed throughout Asia, Europe, and Latin America. Although built with low-interest loans, recipient nations usually find themselves entangled in financial or political commitments that only draw them further into China's sphere of influence. Connecting the dots, it is clear that the South China Sea is just one part of a global game. Encircling and absorbing the South China Sea relies on and reinforces more indirect support points created in the Central Pacific, where small nations such as Tonga, Samoa, Vanuatu, Kiribati, the Solomon Islands, and Fiji have close economic and political ties to China. A similar dynamic is at play in the Indian Ocean, where Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Tanzania, the Maldives, Madagascar, and Djibouti are indebted to Chinese companies. Considering that China's presence in Venezuela, Grenada, Cuba, and Nicaragua garnered less attention than that seen during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the true impact of the South China Sea conflict becomes clearer.

Iranian Control Over Iraq and Syria

The conflict with Iran is longer in the making and harder to see due to the routinized bouts of localized conflict through proxies in Lebanon, the West Bank, Gaza, and Syria. However, when ISIS emerged in Iraq and Iran became involved in pushing it back, the United States and Iran entered into a major direct conflict, although it is not recognized as such. Despite their vision being muddied by the presence of a common enemy, neither side should have had any illusions that the strategic battlefield would belong to the contender who was strong enough to control the most territory. With ISIS' defeat and the partial withdrawal of U.S. forces from northern Iraq and Syria over the last couple of years, it is clear who won. Iran controls the battlefield and

appoints the local leaders. The killing of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commander Qassem Soleimani was only a last and desperate attempt to change the narrative. The restraint shown by Iran revealed that the strike on Soleimani did not change anything. Iran remains in control of a good swath of Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, reaching as far as the border with Israel.

Given these facts, it is incredible how much credence was invested in the belief that Iran will be hemmed in by the implicit threat of American global military reach. However, the United States failed to follow up on its threats, emboldening the Iranians. In 2007, the United States first warned Iran that it would attack it for continuing to develop its nuclear weapons program and lending support to local Shiite insurgencies. After 2014, when ISIS took over large swaths of Iraq and Syria, the United States closed its eyes to Iran's presence in Iraq and Syria to defeat a common enemy. In both cases, the United States expected Iran to behave like a rational, realpolitik competitor that traded present favors for future advantages. However, Iran, an ideologically-driven actor, did not give U.S. troops much space on the battlefield or allow the United States to regain its political influence in Iraq. The United States' mistake was believing that Iran would return the favor in the name of political self-interest and discard ideological purity. Iran showed a willingness to compromise when it was positioned to gain something, such as implicit support in the fight against ISIS, and unbending ideological opposition, when it was asked to reciprocate, such as by recognizing the role of the United States as a co-guarantor of stability in Syria and Iraq. As mentioned, strategically, the mistake was to interpret the words and the deeds of the Iranian leaders in a way that fit the preferences of the United States.

Iran was allowed to play games without being discreet. The reason was that American leaders expected Iran to behave according to game theory, which predicts that if only one of the players realizes that an all-out conflict leads to mutual loss, it is enough to avoid war. Iran, however, does not play the same game. Iran does not see itself bound by a situation resembling either the prisoner's dilemma or the conventions of realpolitik. Iran plays a long, messianic game. If Iran's religious discourse is taken

seriously and its policies are seen as an expression of that discourse, the necessary pushback would have been appropriately applied. After Operation Iraqi Freedom, Iran was fearful, under-armed, and hemmed in by the American military in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. Later, without pushback, Iran filled the competition gap with conflict and won control of both Syria and Iraq.

The Russian Invasion of Crimea

The most dramatic example of a conflict won before anyone even knew it existed was the occupation and incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation. This time, the loss was due to overestimating the capacity to strike and respond to Russian political and military leaders, despite the fact they overplayed their hand. Rehearsed several times before in marginal areas (Transnistria in 1990s; Ossetia and Abkhazia in the early 2000s), Russia had acted as a competitor until it suddenly struck in 2014. Using a combination of special operations forces, political warfare, and economic pressure, it settled the situation in its favor in a matter of days. However, it was not in a position to withstand a significant and vigorous counterstrike, either locally or globally. Not since Nazi Germany's reoccupation of the Rhineland or the Anschluss was a European power with such a feeble hand given the credence granted only to very large powers. Despite its speed and decisiveness, Russia had neither the conventional military assets nor the stomach to endure a long-term conflict in Crimea or eastern Ukraine. According to the most optimistic projections, Russia had relatively few war-ready units, mostly at the brigade level, and even fewer highly competitive air assets ready to buttress the weak special forces operation in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Any decisive pushback by NATO-supported Ukrainian forces might have stopped the Russian adventure in its tracks.

In Crimea, if the Russian military and political clout were not overestimated, Ukraine (including Crimea) would probably be a NATO screen, not a bleeding wound. Russia committed few military forces and little political muscle on the ground. Instead, it projected a longer shadow than it truly possessed while giving free rein to its proxies.

If the NATO forces fully supported Ukraine in retaking the territory, it is doubtful that Russia would have followed up on its opening gambit.

Recent Russian actions against Ukraine reveal what is actually at stake. Russia requests that Western nations cease supporting Ukraine, that Romania and Bulgaria become only pro-forma NATO allies, with no U.S. troops or installations on their territory, and that Russia has a vote on what NATO does in Europe. This is part probing, part grand strategy. The requests are probing how far NATO and the United States will pull back. The actions are grand strategic moves because the near-conflict threats projected by Russia in and around Ukraine are coordinated with China's, both in word and deed. Russian and Chinese leaders issued a joint anti-NATO communique, which is as close as the world can get to a new formal anti-Western Axis. In 2021, China conducted increasingly intimidating military operations around Taiwan, while asking the island nation to accept Chinese rule. Russian and Chinese coordination is not a coincidence. In 2022, the two nations extended their friendship treaty and strengthened their military cooperation in the land and sea domains. The 2019 U.S. intelligence community's Worldwide Threat Assessment specifically mentioned the deepening cooperation between China and Russia as a major threat to global stability. China and Russia have a formal memorandum of understanding for military cooperation and have repeatedly engaged in strategic maneuvers directed at U.S. allies and interests in the western Pacific.

The Way Forward

The short period of undisputed American hegemony from 1990 to 2010 rested not only on the American perception of invincibility, especially after the Gulf War, but on the belief that a global order resting on legalistic multilateralism encouraged competition within the boundaries of the international rules-bound regime. However, competition proved to be more devious than it seemed and the rules more flexible for U.S. adversaries than imagined. In terms of economic competition, its challengers saw the world as a pie to be shared. The natural conclusion was that the United States gave China and Russia the space to expand their power and control over large swaths of the

global arena without getting anything in exchange. Furthermore, the United States paid the high price of keeping the world in balance by frequent, and at times, disastrous policing operations, from East Africa to the Middle East. In other words, while behaving like a global competitive citizen, the United States ended up losing ground that in other eras would have been given up only through bitter conflict.

To address these problems, U.S. strategists and political leaders need to reconsider the current strategic framework which sees great power relations as a continuous competition. They should instead view U.S. grand strategy as a concatenation of near-conflicts without immediately reversible outcomes. U.S. decisionmakers should also recognize that they are in full conflict with all three powers named above, and more challengers may still emerge. Neither of the three adversaries seems to be interested in playing the old game of competition within the awning of a legalistic global order. Competitively constraining China, Russia, or Iran by traditional means—through bilateral agreements or multilateral redistribution—is no longer sufficient. U.S. adversaries have already bypassed the competitive constraints of the legalistic world order adventuring on the terrain of conflict, asking for more and usually keeping what they take. They are not willing to trade the gains back for the sake of global stability. U.S. leaders should admit that some trade-offs are needed to minimize the costs of hegemony. Finally, U.S. strategic planners need to right-size their adversaries. China should not be underestimated, Russia overestimated, and Iran misestimated. The blurring of the boundaries between competition and conflict should not be ignored or rejected; rather, it should be embraced. The game of competitive conflict should be played to its bitter end, but not before re-establishing a new strategy that makes the United States more powerful but less intrusive in world affairs.

The United States should consider a strategy of selective and deeply collaborative realism. The new realism should rely on three principles: a convergence of purpose; flexibility of action and; shared and cascading responsibility. The first principle demands that the purposes of U.S. strategy should be strengthened and extended in cooperation with nations and international institutions that share the same interests and values as the United States. This might not sound like much of an innovation if we

think that the current strategy also relies on the cooperation of like-minded nations. The point of emphasis in the future strategy is that instead of the current legal-idealism, realism should align values with interests. More importantly, this strategy should be stated as such. Values and interests do not need to be hierarchically organized but pragmatically aligned.

The second principle, flexibility of action, is to be realized by devolution of action and selectivity of intervention in terms of scope, intensity, and place. Devolution refers to the need to support those allies that have the most to lose or gain from disturbances in global stability, rather than work in their name and for them. While keeping these allies close, the United States should provide material, economic, and moral support in their hour of need. In the South China Sea, allies of necessity would include Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Australia. They need to be supported in their claims and actions to counter Chinese power and territorial seizures with the full force and commitment of U.S. military, economic, and political might. In Eastern Europe, Poland, Romania, the Baltic states, and other peripheral NATO members need to be supported and encouraged to stand up to any provocation, assert their rights, and act in self-defense whenever necessary with the full backing of Article 5, which says that an attack on one is an attack on all. The U.S. military and the major NATO nations need a policy of “immediate response” that does not accept provocations or intimidation of any kind. This means encouraging European NATO allies to forcefully act as first responders, while the United States selectively supports, rather than be the first to intervene, in a local conflict. The United States needs to commit and support the claims and counterclaims of its allies and help them ward off Chinese, Russian, and Iranian encroachment. This coordinated, in-depth approach to regional conflict acts as a cascade, starting with the support of the United States but ending with a variety of local stakeholders acting in their interest.

The third principle of shared responsibility refers to the need to make global order and peace the product of global interaction and the balance of power, rather than the mechanical application of U.S. power to varying situations. This is probably the most

difficult aspect of cascading realism. It demands close diplomatic, economic, and military coordination. It also requires disconnecting the understanding of U.S. national interests from maintaining a maximal understanding of the global order. Maintaining global order should be the product of the U.S. interests coupled with that of its allies and collaborators. The guaranteed global order should satisfy the cumulative values and needs of the United States and its allies, starting from the ground up, not from top (the United States) to bottom (U.S. allies), which is the current situation. More directly, the global order should not be a national interest of the United States but the product of the national interests of the United States and its partners to the degree that this order secures their long-term goals, including the realization of the aggregated political, economic, and military values rooted in openness, transparency, and the rule of law. While difficult to realize, this is a more sustainable policy than the current one, which has put the burden of the global order mostly on the shoulders of the United States. This has pushed it into conflictual situations with adversaries such as China, Iran, or Russia while holding it to standards of behavior demanded by the competitive constraints of the current global order. Not being able to devolve responsibility or costs, the United States ended up bearing both while single-handedly dealing with chronic crises, from international terrorism to having its major interests challenged by Saddam Hussein's adventurism, Al Qaeda, ISIS, or China in the South China Sea.

These are hard strategic decisions that might take several presidential cycles to implement. However, it is clear that the U.S. strategy of being a guarantor of the world order is at a point where the costs are higher than the benefits. A policy of cascading realism allows multiple poles of global power and interests, which might accommodate the needs of more powers than the current state of global affairs.

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