



Assumption #1: Revisionist States are the Cause of Great-Power Competition

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SUMMARY

A key unwritten assumption underlies most of today's strategic thinking on US foreign policy: *that stable multipolarity is impossible because of fundamentally aggressive and revisionist states that seek to rewrite international institutions, grab territory, and challenge the status quo.*

Though these states are presumed to be creating a dangerous new era of great-power competition, it is an assumption with remarkably limited evidence to back it up. With regard to China, for example, not all rising states are revisionist; the question of Chinese intentions is still open. The weakness of this assumption also calls into question various derivative assumptions: that multipolarity is bad, that rising powers cannot be accommodated, and that the biggest risk of conflict in the international system arises from deterrence failures rather than misperception. Though the concepts are abstract, the real-world implications are profound. Simply assuming aggression on the part of these states shuts off a variety of plausible policy responses, leaving only maximalist options on the table, whether military buildup, economic decoupling, or diplomatic isolation. Worse, overreacting to a perceived revisionist state in this way, particularly with military means, has the potential to spiral toward conflict, setting up a self-fulfilling prophecy like those seen in 1914 or 1945. In response, this paper suggests four categories of concrete policy response to mitigate these risks.

- An intensification of efforts to understand the scope of ambition of other states (particularly China and Russia), including increased peer-to-peer

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The **New American Engagement Initiative** challenges prevailing assumptions governing US foreign policy and helps policymakers manage risks, set priorities, and allocate resources wisely and efficiently. The United States confronts a range of national security challenges, but the marketplace of ideas defines these too expansively, fails to prioritize them effectively, and limits the range of options for addressing them. Unconventional thinking is needed to help Americans put dangers into perspective, and encourage them to embrace global engagement through diplomacy, trade, and mutually beneficial cultural exchange.

The New American Engagement Initiative's Assumptions Testing series explores some of the foundational beliefs that guide US foreign policy. By questioning the conventional wisdom, and exposing these assumptions to close scrutiny, the series aims to open a new seam in the policy debate and generate a more lively, fruitful, and effective strategic dialogue—one that is capable of producing a sustainable, nonpartisan strategy for US global engagement.

contact between governments, and at the Track Two level, as well as increased intelligence funding.

- Focus less on forward deployment and more on defensive contingencies; wherever possible, rely on partner and allied forces, rather than US troops, for forward presence.
- Engage in reassurance measures with China and Russia; draw from the lessons of the Cold War to develop joint confidence-building measures (CBMs) with peer adversaries.
- Initiate a policy process designed to more clearly define key US priorities and red lines, and to explore places where mutually acceptable revision of international institutions or norms might reduce tensions and defuse future conflicts.

INTRODUCTION

On January 20, 2021, Joe Biden took the oath of office and became the forty-sixth president of the United States. Though his stint as vice president ended only four years ago, he will inherit a substantially changed world. The unorthodox presidency of Donald Trump and the impact of the coronavirus have brought many long-running historical trends to the surface. Though it is cliché to say that 2020 represents an inflection point in history, Joe Biden will find it far harder than most presidents to simply maintain the status quo in US domestic and foreign policy in light of changing circumstances. The rise of China and India, the weakness of US domestic institutions, the growing threat of climate change, increasing steps toward European strategic autonomy, the rise of populism globally, and major shifts in the global energy market all require new modes of thinking and new policy approaches. Yet, US foreign policy has not been fundamentally reassessed since the immediate post-Cold War era three decades ago. Much has changed since that time; these and other challenges require policymakers to step back

and reexamine the assumptions underlying US foreign policy, determining what is accurate and what is not.

Unfortunately, many are eager to put the cart ahead of the horse, seeking a new purpose and role for US foreign policy before conducting that assessment. Primed by the 2017 National Security Strategy—which declared that the United States must pivot from counterterrorism to containing and confronting autocratic great powers—the lines of debate in Washington have largely crystalized around two viewpoints. The first, described by Boston University’s Joshua Shiffrin as “neo-primacy,” suggests that rising great powers like China pose a threat to the United States, and that the United States should adopt a more assertive and confrontational approach to these states.¹ As impeachment hero Alexander Vindman recently argued in the *Washington Post*, “If the United States further retrenches or shifts to such strategies as offshore balancing, a void will expand that autocratic states will fill.”² The second, commonly described as restraint or realism, instead argues that the United States has overextended itself in the post-Cold War world, and should draw back from its wars in the Middle East, seek to cooperate with other states, and avoid excessively militarizing its relationship with China. As CNN host Fareed Zakaria puts it, “The United States risks squandering the hard-won gains from four decades of engagement with China, encouraging Beijing to adopt confrontational policies of its own, and leading the world’s two largest economies into a treacherous conflict of unknown scale and scope.”³ Both arguments are based on core underlying assumptions about how states relate to one another and their intentions; much like US foreign policy itself, these assumptions too often go unexamined. Yet, the dangers of ignoring the unwritten assumptions, even as policymakers seek to reframe US foreign policy for the twenty-first century, cannot be overstated.

This paper is the first in a series published by the New American Engagement Initiative that attempts to challenge the prevailing assumptions underlying US foreign policy. In doing so, it seeks to question the too-often unquestioned notions that guide US foreign policy choices, and to build a new approach to US foreign policy built on a firmer, and more robust, foundation.

1 Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, “Neo-Primacy and the Pitfalls of US Strategy toward China,” *Washington Quarterly* 43, 4, 2020, 79–104.

2 Alexander Vindman, “The United States Must Marshal the ‘Free World,’” *Foreign Affairs*, December 7, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-12-07/united-states-must-marshal-free-world>.

3 Fareed Zakaria, “The New China Scare,” *Foreign Affairs*, December 27, 2020, 53, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-12-06/new-china-scare>.

THE SOURCES OF INSTABILITY

Much of today's strategic thinking on US foreign policy is premised on a single assumption: that stable multipolarity is impossible thanks to revisionist powers, states that seek to challenge the status quo in institutions, norms, and even territory. It suggests that the relative decline of the United States and rise of China will result in a period of increased disorder, trade disruption, and violence. This notion forms the core of arguments for a new, more assertive US grand strategy. Indeed, perhaps the most common phrase in Washington's foreign policy community over the last few years has been "great-power competition." It even has its own acronym: GPC. As the 2017 National Security Strategy put it, "after being dismissed as a phenomenon of an earlier century, great power competition returned."⁴ The National Defense Strategy describes it similarly, as "the re-emergence of long-term, strategic competition between nations."⁵ Even the more scholarly variant of this argument, per Dartmouth political scientist William Wohlforth, suggests "that unipolarity helps explain low levels of military competition and conflict among major powers after 1991 and that a return to bipolarity or multipolarity would increase the likelihood of such conflict."⁶ In layman's terms, Washington's strategic community now largely operates under the assumption that China's rise and the United States' relative decline mean a less stable, and more confrontational, form of global politics.

This is itself a repudiation of the long-running Washington consensus that the rise of peer competitors can be prevented. As Secretary of State Madeleine Albright put it in the 1990s: "China will be a rising force in Asian and world affairs. The history of this century teaches us the wisdom of trying to bring such a power into the fold as a responsible participant

in the international system, rather than driving it out into the wilderness of isolation."⁷ Indeed, as recently as 2016, a bipartisan study group of foreign policy experts could plausibly argue that "there is no reason for a fundamental adjustment in the approach the last eight administrations—Republican and Democratic—have taken to China. Promoting the peaceful rise of a China...remains a sound strategy for the United States."⁸ Today, however, experts have almost uniformly shifted to the language of great-power competition, revisionism, and the idea that such competition is a threat to the United States.

The roots of this shift extend back into the Barack Obama administration. The 2015 National Military Strategy, for example, did not use the term "great-power competition," but argued that "some states...are attempting to revise key aspects of the international order, and are acting in a manner that threatens our national security interests."⁹ The shift then accelerated under the Trump administration. As former Secretary of Defense James Mattis noted in his 2017 confirmation hearings, the United States must "look on the prospect of a new era, one governed by today's economic realities and returning once again to a balance of powers. A return to great-power competition...places the international order under assault."¹⁰ Per Tom Wright, a scholar at the Brookings Institute: "The reemergence of great-power rivalry poses immense challenges to the United States. World politics is becoming more complicated and zero sum."¹¹ Or, as think tank scholars Michael Mazarr and Hal Brands put it, "After a period in which a dominant, US-led Western coalition largely set and enforced the rules of the international order... Russia and China are actively contesting US primacy and alliances in Eastern Europe and East Asia. They are advancing their own vision of a multipolar order in which America is more constrained and its influence diluted."¹² Indeed, this notion of

4 "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," White House, December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905-2.pdf>.

5 "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy," US Department of Defense, 2018, 2, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

6 William C. Wohlforth, "Unipolarity, Status Competition, and Great Power War," *World Politics* 61, 1, 2009, 56.

7 "Albright Interview on NBC-TV 'The Today Show,'" US Department of State, February 19, 1998, <https://1997-2001.state.gov/statements/1998/980219a.html>.

8 Kurt Campbell, et al., "Extending American Power: Strategies to Expand US Engagement in a Competitive World Order," *Extending American Power Project*, Center for a New American Security, May 2016, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/extending-american-power-strategies-to-expand-u-s-engagement-in-a-competitive-world-order>.

9 The National Military Strategy of the United States of America 2015: The United States Military's Contribution to National Security (Fort Belvoir, VA: US Department of Defense, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.21236/ADA619156>.

10 Jim Mattis, "Secretary of Defense, Written Statement for the Record," House Armed Services Committee, 2017, 4, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/AS/AS00/20170612/106090/HHRG-115-AS00-Bio-MattisJ-20170612.pdf>.

11 Thomas Wright, *All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the Twenty-First Century and the Future of American Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 33.

12 Michael Mazarr and Hal Brands, "Navigating Great Power Rivalry in the 21st Century," *War on the Rocks*, April 5, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/04/navigating-great-power-rivalry-in-the-21st-century/>.

a United States forced to play by the rules of others pervades arguments about the risks of great-power competition. According to former Trump administration officials Wess Mitchell and Elbridge Colby, “the United States is entering what is likely to be a protracted struggle over who will decide how the world works in the twenty-first century.”¹³

Washington today almost uniformly accepts this description of the world as accurate, suggesting that China’s rise necessarily implies an unstable multipolar world in which US interests are imperiled. Yet, the most interesting component of this assumption is the presumed source of the instability. Neorealist scholars have often argued that larger numbers of states can increase instability. As the political scientist Ken Waltz described it: “increased numbers of actors increase levels of systemic uncertainty. Rising uncertainty heightens potential miscommunication and conflict.”¹⁴ And some scholars do, indeed, focus on the risks found in the rise of new powers; perhaps the best-known is the notion of the “Thucydides Trap.” Graham Allison of Harvard University argues: “when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling one, the most likely outcome is war.”¹⁵ These are the natural dynamics of the security dilemma; faced with uncertainty, states may end up on the path to conflict without intending to do so. This dynamic is worsened, as fellow academic Bob Jervis notes, “by the fact that most means of self-protection simultaneously menace others.”¹⁶

Yet, most of today’s policy writing does not focus on the role of misperception or miscommunication (traditionally the argument of defensive realists). Instead, it makes the offensive realist assumption that multipolarity is inherently unstable because of the role of revisionist states in challenging the existing order.¹⁷ The sudden shift over the last few years from advocating a “peaceful managed rise” for China to “great-power competition” largely follows from a shift in assumptions about

intentions, rather than any shift in the trend lines of China’s rise. As Aaron Friedberg, an advisor to former Vice President Dick Cheney, notes, analysts are beginning to “re-examine the pleasing assumption that the country is fast on its way to becoming a status quo power.”¹⁸ In short, Washington’s policy community largely believes that the United States is headed for a more dangerous world, but has not really stopped to ask itself why, instead assuming that it is the result of revisionist states that seek to challenge the international status quo. Failing to examine this assumption risks worsening the situation through policy overreaction.

THE EXTENT OF REVISIONISM

Instability is, thus, assumed to derive from revisionist intentions. Revisionist states are typically understood to be those which seek, as the classical realists described it, “a demand for a change in the status quo.”¹⁹ They are often, though not always, presumed to be rising powers. And, while there are many reasons for states to be revisionist, in this case it is widely assumed that they are seeking power, rather than security. As Hal Brands explains, “ideology and the quest for greatness—not simply insecurity—often drive great powers. Rising states are continually tempted to renegotiate previous bargains once they have the power to do so.”²⁰ Most of the strategic writing emanating from Washington today assumes that China and Russia, in particular, are fundamentally revisionist, though they differ on the presumed goals of that revisionism. On China, the general consensus now reflects the view that “since the Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1995–96...there have been accumulating signs that Beijing is not a status quo power, but rather one determined to reshape the East Asian order.”²¹ Some argue that the revisionism is limited to institutions and prestige, rather than territorial or extraregional ambitions. Grand strategists

13 Elbridge A. Colby and A. Wess Mitchell, “The Age of Great-Power Competition,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 30, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-12-10/age-great-power-competition>.

14 Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Waveland Press, 2010), 168. It is also worth noting that the classical realists typically described a multipolar world as relatively stable.

15 Allison, Graham, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* (London: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

16 Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics: New Edition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 63.

17 For a full discussion of the distinctions between offensive and defensive realism, see Steven E. Lobell, “Structural Realism/Offensive and Defensive Realism,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*, March 1, 2010, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.304>.

18 Aaron L. Friedberg, “The Debate Over US China Strategy,” *Survival* 57, 3, May 4, 2015, 89–110, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2015.1046227>.

19 Paula Dobriansky, “Ask the Experts: Should US Foreign Policy Focus on Great-Power Competition?,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 14, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ask-the-experts/2020-10-13/should-us-foreign-policy-focus-great-power-competition>.

20 Hal Brands, “Don’t Let Great Powers Carve Up the World,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 26, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-04-20/dont-let-great-powers-carve-world>.

21 Hal Brands, “The Chinese Century?” *National Interest*, February 19, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-chinese-century-24557>.

Mira Rapp-Hooper and Rebecca Lissner, for example, argue that “Russia and China are demanding a modified order that better accommodates the ambitions and appetites of their domestic regimes.”²² As Tom Wright puts it: “Rival powers will try to weaken the US model of international order and advance their own.”²³

Many others, however, argue that China is instead seeking to displace the United States as regional—or global—hegemon, destroying rather than modifying the current international order, and extending its territorial reach. The Trump administration’s National Defense Strategy, for example, states that “it is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model—gaining veto authority over other nations’ economic, diplomatic, and security decisions.” Russia seeks to “shatter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and change European and Middle East security and economic structures to its favor,” while China seeks “Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future.”²⁴ This echoes the arguments made by a number of policy analysts in recent years, whether in general form—as in political scientist Colin Dueck’s assertion that “we see revisionist authoritarian forces pushing up against existing regional orders to assert alternative political-ideological visions, including their own increased influence, status and external and internal security” —or in more specific terms, as in Aaron Friedberg’s assertion that “China is trying to replace the United States as the world’s leading economic and technological nation and to displace it as the preponderant power in East Asia.”²⁵

The current Washington consensus can largely be summed up thusly: “Given the current and projected policies of Beijing and Moscow, which aim at harming US strategic interests, fragmenting our alliances, and fostering global and regional instabilities, it is imperative to devise appropriate US responses to these challenges.”²⁶ Or as Michael Mandelbaum of Johns Hopkins University puts it, “By the end of 2014 power politics had returned to three crucial regions of the world in the form of ambitious, aggressive countries seeking regional dominance.

The proper business of American foreign policy had become resisting the designs of Russia in Europe, of China in East Asia, and of Iran in the Middle East.”²⁷ The foreign policy community in Washington is now dedicated to turning the ship of state to face these new presumed threats.

The assumption that China, Russia and other states are inherently revisionist results in a cluster of derivative assumptions. The first, as discussed above, follows naturally: revisionist states make multipolarity more unstable, make conflict more likely, and result in a United States that “is more constrained and its influence diluted.”²⁸ A second assumption also follows logically: that rising powers cannot—for the most part—be accommodated within the existing international order. The 2017 National Security Strategy, for example, argues that “China and Russia want to shape a world antithetical to US values and interests. China seeks to displace the United States.”²⁹ Brookings Institution scholar Bruce Jones echoes the argument that Chinese and US goals in international order are incompatible, arguing that “the Chinese approach may simply be too unpalatable for the West to accede to a sharing of power.”³⁰ Still others doubt that concessions would be enough to save the existing order or to build a new, more inclusive one. Michael Mazarr and Hal Brands take it further, arguing that “making concessions to Russia or China in hopes of drawing them into such a concert could well be more destabilizing than stabilizing.”³¹

Third, the assumption of revisionism suggests that spheres of influence are bad for US national security. This is distinct from—though often presented alongside—the more ideologically driven notion that spheres of influence are immoral because they deny agency to smaller states that might not wish to align with the dominant power in the region. That is itself debatable, but is at least based on a philosophical principle. In contrast, arguments about revisionism typically suggest that spheres of influence are a form of appeasement, and assume that revisionist states are unlikely to be satisfied with such concessions. As Hal Brands puts it, “offering concessions to a revisionist state may simply convince it that the existing order is fragile and can be tested further...Conceding a sphere

22 Rebecca Lissner and Mira Rapp-Hooper, *An Open World: How America Can Win the Contest for Twenty-First-Century Order* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 25.

23 Wright, *All Measures Short of War*, 189.

24 “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy,” 2.

25 Colin Dueck, *Age of Iron: On Conservative Nationalism* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 162; Aaron L. Friedberg, “An Answer to Aggression,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-08-11/ccp-answer-aggression>.

26 Dobriansky, “Ask the Experts: Should US Foreign Policy Focus on Great-Power Competition?”

27 Michael Mandelbaum, “America in a New World,” *American Interest*, May 23, 2016, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2016/05/23/america-in-a-new-world/>.

28 Mazarr and Brands, “Navigating Great Power Rivalry in the 21st Century.”

29 Though confusingly, it then states: “The intentions of both nations are not necessarily fixed.” “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” 25.

30 Bruce Jones, “China and the Return of Great Power Strategic Competition,” *Global China*, 11.

31 Mazarr and Brands, “Navigating Great Power Rivalry in the 21st Century.”

of influence to a great-power challenger might not produce stability but simply give that challenger a better position from which to realize its ambitions.”³²

Similarly, a fourth sub-assumption here is that the biggest risk of conflict in the international system arises from deterrence failure, rather than misperception. It is the notion that if the United States fails to sufficiently deter revisionist actors, then they will push for more gains, making conflict more likely. In layman’s terms, this is the “if you give a mouse a cookie” theory of conflict; in academic circles, it is known as the deterrence theory of war. Or, as former Undersecretary of Defense Michèle Flournoy puts it, “the more confident China’s leaders are in their own capabilities and the more they doubt the capabilities and resolve of the United States, the greater the chance of miscalculation—a breakdown in deterrence that could bring direct conflict between two nuclear powers. As tensions continue to rise and Chinese assertiveness in the region grows, it will take a concerted effort to rebuild the credibility of US deterrence in order to reduce the risk of a war that neither side seeks.”³³ All four sub-assumptions flow directly from the assumption that most states, and especially rising states, are committed revisionists; all four are critical to determining the future path of US foreign policy.

RETHINKING THE ASSUMPTIONS

This is a challenging assumption to unpack as some elements of it are partially, or even wholly, true. Others, however, are still open to interpretation; assuming otherwise could be hugely detrimental to the US national interest. This unpacking starts with the most obvious of the correct assumptions: the United States is in relative decline compared to China—and to a number of other states.³⁴ China has already surpassed the United States’ gross domestic

product (GDP) in terms of purchasing-power parity, though China’s sizeable population means that it will be a long time before it overtakes the United States on a per-capita basis.³⁵ But, since 1991, China’s annual GDP growth has averaged 10 percent in real terms; during the same period, the US economy only grew by an average of 2.5 percent per annum.³⁶ There is little doubt that China is rising in comparison to the United States, and is on track to become the world’s most powerful economy. It is not clear whether China can surpass the United States’ military supremacy even in the longer term, nor whether China will continue its upward growth indefinitely; the country has serious demographic and economic challenges in its future. It is certain, however, that the United States no longer possesses the vast predominance in economic and military terms that it possessed at the end of the Cold War. The unipolar moment is over, and other countries are rising relative to the United States.

Likewise, it is correct to note that multipolarity is probably more unstable than unipolarity or bipolarity. As the University of Chicago’s John Mearsheimer notes, “War is more likely in multipolarity than bipolarity...there are more opportunities for war... imbalances of power are more commonplace...and the potential for miscalculation is greater.”³⁷ William Wohlforth likewise argues that unipolarity “generates far fewer incentives than either bipolarity or multipolarity for direct great power positional competition over status.” Though it is unclear how the existence of nuclear weapons might change this dynamic, it seems reasonable to assume that multipolarity will continue to be less stable than bipolarity or unipolarity, simply due to the number of opportunities for unrest.³⁸ Finally, it is correct to note that both China and Russia have engaged in actions in recent years that could be seen as revisionist. Russia has fought wars in Ukraine and Georgia, has engaged in electoral meddling in the United States, and has attempted to undermine democratic movements in its “near abroad.” Meanwhile, China

32 Brands, “Don’t Let Great Powers Carve Up the World.”

33 Michèle Flournoy, “How to Prevent a War in Asia,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 23, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-06-18/how-prevent-war-asia>.

34 There is a cottage industry of works arguing either that the United States is or is not in decline. It is certainly an open debate as to whether America is in absolute decline. The debate is also still open on whether the trajectory of Chinese growth will continue; the example of 1990s Japan is often cited in this regard. Yet, there is no real question that the current trend lines—technically and correctly defined—place the United States in relative decline. That is to say, on a comparative basis, the United States is growing slower than China, and is likely to soon be overtaken; when it will be overtaken is largely a function of the economic indicator chosen. See, e.g., Edward Luce, *Time To Start Thinking: America and the Spectre of Decline* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown Book Group, 2012); Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World’s Sole Superpower* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

35 Jeffrey Frankel, “Is China Overtaking the US as a Financial and Economic Power?” *Guardian*, May 29, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/may/29/is-china-overtaking-the-us-as-a-financial-and-economic-power>.

36 Wayne M Morrison, “China’s Economic Rise: History, Trends, Challenges, and Implications for the United States,” Congressional Research Service, accessed January 5, 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33534.pdf>; “GDP Growth (Annual %)—United States,” World Bank DataBank, accessed January 5, 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2019&locations=US&start=1991>.

37 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (Updated Edition) (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 338.

38 Most of the scholarly work on polarity and great-power relations is based on cases from the period before nuclear weapons and the idea of mutually assured destruction. In a period of multipolarity, it is possible that nuclear weapons could provide greater stability—as they likely did during the cold war. But, it is also possible that they worsen things, as proponents of the stability-instability paradox argue. For more on this, see “Stability-Instability Paradox,” in Fathali M. Moghaddam, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Political Behavior* (New York: SAGE Publications, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483391144.n364>.

has expanded its territorial claims in the South China Sea, has taken a more hostile approach to some of its neighbors—Taiwan, Vietnam, and others—and has begun to try to form its own international institutions.

But, while these facts are true, many of the other parts of this assumption are more questionable, notably the notion that multipolarity is inherently dangerous because of aggressive, revisionist states. In the first place, not all rising states are revisionist. International relations scholarship suggests that it takes more than simple shifts in the balance of power to drive revisionism. As political scientist Jason Davidson describes, “rising states must face domestic or international pressures in order to consider revisionism...they will only adopt revisionist goals if they believe that they have the opportunity to achieve revisionist goals.”³⁹ Indeed, “there is not necessarily any reason to expect rising powers to threaten international order...in fact, states experiencing or expecting relative increases in wealth or military power have incentives to integrate with status quo institutions.”⁴⁰ Aggressive revisionism can arise from domestic political factors, from psychological ones, or from ideology, but it is never just about power shifts. Thus, China’s rise does not necessarily signal its intentions; the same could be said for Russia’s decline. Consider Tsarist Russia during the Napoleonic period: a state that had risen rapidly, but whose major intervention in the international system during that period was not revolutionary, but reactionary.

Indeed, the question of Chinese intentions is still open, a fact often ignored or glossed over. As Michael Mazarr and Hal Brands point out: “the final answers to one critical question—the scope of Russian and Chinese ambitions, and the steps they are willing to take to achieve them—remain unknowable... There are powerful and growing reasons for concern, but there is also accumulated evidence that these two states view a stable international order as important to their interests.”⁴¹ As international relations scholarship has repeatedly emphasized, it is challenging to tell when a state is engaged in aggressive revisionist goals, or when it is simply trying to ensure its own

security. Just consider the debate over Russian intentions in recent years: some argue that Russia’s aggression in its near abroad is a clear sign of its revanchist intentions, while others like Mearsheimer argue that “the West had been moving into Russia’s backyard and threatening its core strategic interests.”⁴² This aggression *could* be revanchist, but it could equally be a security-based response to fears of NATO encroachment. Nor is the concept of revisionism well defined. As international relations scholar Alastair Iain Johnston notes, “For a concept at the core of international relations theorizing, it disturbing [sic] how little thought...has gone into determining whether a state is status quo or revisionist across the totality of its foreign policy preferences and actions.”⁴³

Perhaps more importantly, even if one accepts that China, Russia, or other states are revisionist, the extent of that revisionism is unknown. As the political scientist Randall Schweller describes, “Not all rising powers are dangerous revisionists... and revisionism is not always dangerous. Not every revisionist seeks to overthrow the existing order, to maximize its power, or to do so at the expense of others.”⁴⁴ Whether revisionism poses a problem depends on the extent of the revisionist state’s aims, the nature of those aims, and the means it uses—peaceful or violent—to achieve those aims. In Robert Gilpin’s classic work, he argued that rising states can pursue two kinds of change, “continuous incremental adjustments within the framework of the existing system” or “revolutionary changes in the international system.”⁴⁵ As Johnston describes, China has in many ways been challenging the existing system from the inside, challenging its rules while engaging more deeply with the world. “The evidence is most problematic,” he argues, “concerning the goal of establishing Chinese hegemony in the region or beyond...it is hard to conclude that China is a clearly revisionist state operating outside, or barely inside, the boundaries of a so-called international community.”⁴⁶ Assuming that revisionism is unbounded also suggests that challenger states cannot be satisfied with even moderate changes to the existing international order. Even if China were to have territorial ambitions with regard to the South China Sea—which

39 Jason Davidson, *The Origins of Revisionist and Status-Quo States* (New York: Springer, 2016).

40 Steven Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 10.

41 Mazarr and Brands, “Navigating Great Power Rivalry in the 21st Century.”

42 John J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 18, 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault>.

43 Alastair Iain Johnston, “Is China a Status Quo Power?” *International Security* 27, 4, 2003, 5–56.

44 Randall L Schweller, “Rising Powers and Revisionism in Emerging International Orders,” *Valdai Club*, May 2015, <https://valdaiclub.com/files/11391/>.

45 Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 45–46.

46 Johnston, “Is China a Status Quo Power?”

could be seen as an attempt to bolster its own security—that does not mean it seeks to dominate the whole Pacific; Chinese intentions or actions toward Taiwan are not indicative of its intentions toward Japan or South Korea. There are numerous examples where even territorial revisionism has been limited; the United States’ territorial acquisitions in the nineteenth century, for example, did not lead to further revisionism.

In some ways, this maximalist understanding of revisionism arises from the idea that all territorial aggression is illegal. Yet, the norm that states cannot seize territory is a relatively recent creation, only codified in the UN charter in 1945. And, it is only sporadically observed: Russia was criticized for its seizure of Crimea, but smaller land grabs have often been ignored by the major powers, and the United States recently chose to recognize wartime territorial acquisitions by Israel and Morocco.⁴⁷ The United States does not have to abandon its support for this norm in order to acknowledge that there are degrees of territorial aggression, some of which are more problematic than others. Broadly, as Bob Jervis notes, “our memories of [Adolf] Hitler have tended to obscure the fact that most statesmen are unwilling to pay an exorbitant price for a chance at expansion...more moderate leaders are apt to become defenders of the status quo when they receive significant concessions.”⁴⁸

Likewise, the notion that spheres of influence are harmful is directly linked to the extent of Chinese or Russian revisionism. Ignoring this question is not an option. In fact, the United States already tacitly concedes that such spheres exist. Policymakers did not respond to Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008 or to the 2014 seizure of Crimea with military force. This is an implicit acceptance of the fact that there are places where the interests of other great powers might outweigh those of the United States, and the costs of resisting territorial aggression are too high. Doing this while categorically opposing the notion of spheres of influence places the United States in the worst of all worlds: other states know that there are limits to the US willingness to use military force, but not *what* those limits are. This reduces the United States’ ability to deter conflict in its true areas of concern. More generally, accepting spheres of

influence may well be the best method to deal with a rising China and declining Russia. Though true that this choice reduces the agency of smaller states, it may be unavoidable if policymakers are to protect US interests.

Indeed, pushing smaller states to make a choice—for example, between China and the United States—can also be damaging. Consider the case of Ukraine. As think tankers Samuel Charap and Timothy Colton argue, all “of the parties to [the Ukraine crisis], in our view, are worse off than before it began... the negative-sum outcome we behold today is a product of zero-sum policies pursued by Russia, the US, and the EU.”⁴⁹ Their argument is simple: by forcing Ukraine to choose between Russia and the West, the great powers precipitated a no-win conflict in that country. The principle applies more broadly. US policy often acts as if states will inevitably bandwagon with China if they are not allied with the United States. But, allowing states to retain flexibility may minimize Chinese pushback, and be best for all involved. As Graham Allison notes, “Traditionally, great powers have demanded a degree of deference from lesser powers on their borders and in adjacent seas, and they have expected other great powers to respect that fact.” Today’s policymakers might just “have to abandon unattainable aspirations for the worlds they dreamed of and accept the fact that spheres of influence will remain a central feature of geopolitics.”⁵⁰ Or, as journalist Peter Beinart puts it: “as with Russia, jettisoning the assumption that America must deny China a sphere of influence might help policymakers husband American leverage for the things that matter most.”⁵¹

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Though this paper has in many ways been theoretical, the ideas discussed here are fundamental to the future of US foreign policy. If this assumption is not true—if other states are not necessarily revisionist, or if the extent of that revisionism is unclear—then many of the neo-primacist approaches currently being proposed for US foreign policy are problematic. Worse, they are potentially dangerous. As history has shown, one state’s defensive choices are often perceived

47 Dan Altman, “The Evolution of Territorial Conquest After 1945 and the Limits of the Territorial Integrity Norm,” *International Organization* 74, 3, June 2020, 490–522, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000119>.

48 Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 90.

49 Samuel Charap and Timothy J. Colton, *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia* (London: Routledge, 2018).

50 Graham Allison, “The New Spheres of Influence,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-02-10/new-spheres-of-influence>.

51 Peter Beinart, “America Needs an Entirely New Foreign Policy for the Trump Age,” *The Atlantic*, accessed January 5, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/09/shield-of-the-republic-a-democratic-foreign-policy-for-the-trump-age/570010/>.

by other states as aggressive. It hardly matters whether this arises from misperception (as defensive realists often claim), or from uncertainty (as offensive realists argue). In either case, an overreaction to a perceived revisionist state—particularly if it involves military buildup—has the potential to move the United States closer to conflict and set up a self-fulfilling prophecy.

This, in fact, is the key concern noted by Bob Jervis: “that the policies that flow from deterrence theory (e.g. development of potent and flexible armed forces; a willingness to fight for issues of low intrinsic value; avoidance of any appearance of weakness) are just those that, according to the spiral model, are most apt to heighten tensions.”⁵² The most famous and catastrophic instance of this was the First World War, when the perceived advantages of early mobilization ultimately led to a conflict no one wanted, killing millions. But, it is a more general phenomenon: the Cold War may also have emerged from a spiral of this kind, as did the Six Days War, the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, and a variety of other conflicts. It is also often the case, as Steven Ward notes, that status concerns—in particular being blocked from within the existing system—can breed a normative dissatisfaction within a rising state, weakening moderate politicians, and making it harder for that state to maintain a moderate foreign policy. Imperial Japan, as he describes, pushed for decades after the Meiji restoration to be accepted into the Western “club.” Ultimately, however, it was rebuffed, emboldening internal hardliners, and pushing Japanese foreign policy in a more aggressive direction.⁵³ The lessons of history are clear: if not careful, overreaction to perceived Chinese revisionism could be worse than the alternatives.

As a result, attempting to ascertain the scope of Chinese intentions—or Russian intentions, or Iranian intentions, etc.—is key to building a coherent, workable US grand strategy. Simply assuming unbridled revisionism on the part of these states shuts off a variety of plausible policy responses, leaving only maximalist policy options on the table, whether military buildups, economic decoupling, or diplomatic isolation. As so often in past cases, this mistaken assumption could well lead to overreaction, miscommunication, and even to potential conflict. At the same time, it is possible that this analysis is wrong; though the evidence today suggests the opposite, it is conceivable that China or Russia are genuinely irreconcilable territorial revisionists. How to address this dilemma? Though a full response to this weighty problem is outside the scope of this paper—indeed, it remains one of the fundamental questions of the field of international relations!—the analysis here suggests four categories of concrete policy response that can help to mitigate the risks of

being mistaken about the extent of adversaries’ revisionism. In each case, the response would be useful even if states are more revisionist than currently assumed.

- Intensify efforts to understand the scope of ambition of other states (particularly China and Russia). There are many ways to do this; the best will rely on a combination of government and societal resources. These efforts should increase funding for educational initiatives, similar to the Title VIII authorities used to promote learning of Soviet languages, history, and politics during the Cold War. Efforts should also involve increased peer-to-peer contact, not only between governments, but particularly at the Track Two level and below. At present, security imperatives provide little incentive for interaction between Chinese, Russian, and US civil-society organizations, particularly think-tank staff who expect to be in government positions in the future. Yet, such contacts allow for more open discussion of the possibilities in, say, arms control or security issues. Finally, the United States would be well served by increasing funding for intelligence gathering, in particular, prioritization of human-intelligence sources; while counterterrorism will continue, intelligence agencies and authorities should reorient their focus to their original and core function: peer states.
- Focus strategy and force posture less on forward regional presence—which is likely to provoke a reaction—and more on defensive contingencies for the United States and key allies. This will have two benefits: avoiding escalatory dynamics and making it somewhat easier to discern defensive and offensive moves by other states. Specific policies could include avoiding freedom-of-navigation operations (FONOPS) and troop buildup in Asia, for example, or resisting the urge to increase the number of “tripwire forces” in Eastern Europe. Where possible, rely on partner and allied forces rather than US troops for forward presence as these may be less threatening, and less likely to precipitate conflict.
- Engage in reassurance measures toward China, and seek to develop joint confidence-building measures (CBMs). As during the Cold War, CBMs can be of use whether or not China’s intentions are truly revisionist. Indeed, though much of the attention has focused on the importance of building arms control with China, it is important to note that Cold War-era confidence-building measures did not start with high-level nuclear or arms control. Instead,

52 Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 84.

53 Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers*, 42–43.

the successive crises of the 1960s in Berlin, Cuba, and Czechoslovakia encouraged both the United States and the Soviet Union to develop measures that might “avoid inadvertent major military conflict or nuclear annihilation.”⁵⁴ As then, today’s CBMs should aim for small, incremental improvements that can reduce the risk of conflict in the long run. Allowing observers at military exercises—a tradition that goes back to European militaries of the nineteenth century—can provide transparency and a way for both sides to gain intelligence that tempers threat perceptions. CBMs with regard to China’s relationship with Taiwan is another promising avenue, while higher-level arms-control discussions around space, hypersonics, artificial intelligence (AI), or other new technologies could also be of use. In each case, these confidence-building steps need to be matched with compatible signaling; the United States cannot simply say one thing and do another.

- Initiate a process within the National Security Council and the interagency aimed at more clearly defining key US priorities and red lines and seek to communicate these more effectively to other states. Minimize broad, expansive language by policymakers where possible, and instead focus on specific red lines. More importantly, the review should consider the United States’ top priorities, which interests are non-negotiable, and where it might be possible to accommodate or cooperate with adversaries. This could include mutually acceptable revision of international norms or institutions, such as a willingness to reapportion representation in the Bretton Woods institutions, or a US commitment to desist from regime-threatening democracy promotion inside autocratic competitors. It could even include territorial compromise, such as arms-control agreements that limit where certain technologies can deploy. In each case, the key is a clearer, better communicated statement of the United States’ key interests, which will help to improve its deterrent capabilities, defuse nascent disputes, and minimize the chance of misunderstandings that could cause conflict.

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54 Zdzisław Lachowski, *Confidence- and Security-Building Measures in the New Europe*, SIPRI Research Report, 18 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

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