



CONFRONTING ANOTHER AXIS? HISTORY, HUMILITY, AND WISHFUL THINKING

Philip Zelikow

Drawing on his extensive experience as a historian and diplomat, Philip Zelikow warns that the United States faces an exceptionally volatile time in global politics and that the period of maximum danger might be in the next one to three years. He highlights lessons from the anti-American partnerships developed by the Axis powers in World War II and Moscow and Beijing during the early Cold War. Zelikow reminds decision-makers who face Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea today to remember that adversaries can miscalculate and recalculate and that it can be difficult to fully understand internal divisions within an adversary's government, how rival states draw their own lessons from different interpretations of history, and how they might quickly react to a new event that appears to shift power dynamics.

The United States faces a purposeful set of powerful adversaries in a rapidly changing and militarized period of history, short of all-out war. This is the third time the United States has been confronted with such a situation. The first was between 1937 and 1941 and was resolved by American entry into World War II. The second was between 1948 and 1962, implicating the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. Thankfully, world war was avoided and in November 1962 the Soviet Union relaxed its stance in the central confrontation in Europe.¹

It is not yet clear when and how the present-day crisis will resolve.

We are in an exceptionally volatile, dynamic, and unstable period of world history. During the next two or three years, the situation will probably settle more durably in one direction or another: wider war or uneasy peace. There is a serious possibility of worldwide warfare. Because of the variety of contingencies and outcomes, some involving nuclear arsenals, this period could be more difficult to gauge and more dangerous for the United States than the prior two episodes.

I train a historian's microscope on some of the inner deliberations in past episodes. By recovering a few glimpses of other times in which there were rapid recalculations, quick turns, and surprises, we gain humility and better sift the possibilities now.

I start by introducing the challenge of gauging serious risks in the past, focusing on an oft-forgotten crisis involving Yugoslavia in 1951. I next explain what the anti-American partnerships tend to have in com-

mon. I review the twisty and surprising way that the original "Axis" developed into 1941. I then summarize the interactions that led to war with the United States, a war that the Axis powers had hoped to avoid, or at least postpone, when 1941 began. I also summarize how the anti-American partnership solidified and worked in the period of maximum danger of World War III, between 1948 and the end of 1962. Recalling these experiences conditions us for possible recalculations by U.S. adversaries and painful shocks.

In the past, these changes occurred for reasons that outsiders often did not understand or expect. Enemy leaders changed course, sometimes sharply, as they saw successes or reverses in other parts of the world. This suggests that the outcome of the war in Ukraine might strongly affect the wider course of world history.

Assessing the anti-American coalition today, I look at the Chinese vision for peaceful coexistence. Rather than treat this as an analogy to the era of Cold War detente in the early 1970s, it may be more useful to recall the vision of "peaceful coexistence" that Nikita Khrushchev articulated during the late 1950s, which was a prelude to heightened confrontation.

I fear that the legacy of American success in its past global confrontations can encourage wishful thinking now. I note how different America's circumstances and capabilities are today, as it balances the danger of simultaneous conflicts worldwide. The most serious risks may be those that place the burden on America to escalate in a crisis, in these changed circumstances. I illustrate this point in the Taiwan context.

A frequent answer to such dilemmas is to engage in

¹ The prewar period in this rivalry ended in 1950 and the danger of World War III reached an initial peak in 1950–52. That danger rose again, reaching another kind of crescendo in 1958–62. Although by 1959 the Soviet Union and China were no longer really functioning as strategic partners, they were both pursuing quite confrontational strategies.

wishful thinking, usually a call for general American rearmament and reinvigorated power projection. But, absent another great shock, these plans are unlikely to be enacted soon enough and would take a number of years to bear fruit, even if they are well conceived. And, precisely because some allied movements to build up arsenals have gotten underway, the period of maximum danger may be in the short term — the coming one, two, or three years. U.S. and allied leaders should concentrate on how they will cope with forces more readily available. Since the worst case would be a traumatic defeat, U.S. leaders will need to develop more practical plans than seem evident now, with some potentially painful tradeoffs.

I call attention to the neglected significance of economic deterrent tools, amid so much attention to military instruments. Since use of the military instruments will cause economic calamity anyway, there is no good reason not to give much more attention to these economic tools.

I'm relatively optimistic over the medium and long term, but deeply worried about the challenge of getting through the next few years.

A Serious Possibility: The Promise and Peril of Gauging Risk

On Tuesday, March 20, 1951, the CIA's new board of national estimates, then led by William Langer and Sherman Kent, distributed a new national intelligence estimate. It was on the "Probability of an Invasion of Yugoslavia in 1951."

To me, a serious possibility of worldwide warfare may be only in the 20–30 percent range. But that assessment is not reassuring.

When this estimate on Soviet plans for Yugoslavia was distributed, the United States had been engaged in a limited war in Korea for nearly a year. Several months earlier, China had joined this war. By the end of 1950, the United States had declared a national emergency, begun a national mobilization, and tripled its defense budget, preparing for World War III.² In March 1951, the most likely place where America's

enemies might wish to widen the war was in central Europe. Since a direct Soviet attack on West Germany would foreseeably and quickly lead to nuclear escalation, the most likely flashpoint was Yugoslavia.

There the communist leader, Josip Broz Tito, had broken openly with Joseph Stalin in 1948. He had avoided the assassination and coup attempts that followed, and he had brutally purged possible Soviet sympathizers. So, Moscow's last option to bring Tito to heel was invasion, and it began to plan for one.³

Both the Soviet government and the CIA analysts who were studying it foresaw that such an invasion of Yugoslavia could lead to the intervention of the Western powers. And as everyone understood, this would risk general war.

Tracking evident military preparations, the CIA's board of national estimates came to believe the Soviets and their satellites had laid the groundwork for an invasion of Yugoslavia. But they saw no indication of timing or imminence. So, led by Langer and Kent, they concluded, "Although it is impossible to determine which course the Kremlin is likely to adopt, an attack on Yugoslavia in 1951 should be considered a serious possibility."

Langer and Kent were historians. One of the more eminent world historians in the country, Langer had taught at Harvard and would return there. Kent had taught at Yale and would remain at the CIA. Both were already deeply experienced in wartime political and military analysis, in the Office of Strategic Services and after.

Later that week, Kent strolled from CIA headquarters, which was then in downtown DC, over to the State Department to discuss this estimate with Paul Nitze, the director of policy planning. Kent recalled that Nitze asked, "What did you people mean by the expression 'serious possibility'? What kind of odds did you have in mind?"

Kent replied, "I told him that my personal estimate was on the dark side, namely that the odds were around 65 to 35 [percent] in favor of an attack." Nitze "was somewhat jolted by this; he and his colleagues had read 'serious possibility' to mean odds very considerably lower."

Kent then went back and polled his colleagues. Their odds in favor of an attack had, it turned out, ranged between 20 and 80 percent. Kent recalled this story, 13 years later, as a lesson in clarity of expression.⁴

2 A fine, neglected account is Lisle Rose, *The Cold War Comes to Main Street: America in 1950* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999).

3 "The 1948 Yugoslav-Soviet split was total, and the ideological, political, and military hostility in the subsequent years comprehensive. Between 1948 and [1954], Yugoslavia was under a real threat of a military invasion from the Soviets and their satellite states. Border incidents and armed clashes were an everyday occurrence." Svetozar Rajak, "The Tito-Khrushchev Correspondence, 1954," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 12/13 (Fall/Winter 2001), 315.

4 Quotes from NIE-29, March 20, 1951, in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1951*, vol. 4 pt. 2, doc. no. 876; and Sherman Kent, "Words of Estimative Probability," *Studies in Intelligence*, Fall 1964 (declassified), NARA RG 263.

The Soviet invasion didn't happen and the danger was largely forgotten. Kent's worry about the "dark side" became rueful anecdote. However, he was closer to the mark than he knew.

Two months before he helped write the National Intelligence Estimate, in January 1951, there had been a top-secret conference in Moscow. The American analysts had known nothing of it. There, Stalin had told key leaders, including from satellite countries, to prepare urgently, on a crash basis, to invade Yugoslavia. He told them to prepare for the possibility of general war.

For a year, Stalin had orchestrated and watched the developments in Korea. At that January 1951 conference in Moscow, Stalin sized up the situation confidently. The United States, he declared, had failed to defeat China and North Korea. This failure demonstrated that "the United States is unprepared to start a third world war and is not even capable of fighting a small war."⁵

So, as it turns out, the Soviet bloc preparations in 1951 and 1952 were very real. Historians still do not know why the Soviet invasion of Yugoslavia did not happen.

Stalin may have been deterred. NATO had, after all, reacted strongly to the "serious possibility." Washington had rushed massive U.S. military aid to Yugoslavia. That was quite a remarkable and rapid move, and a somewhat shocking one as it was in aid of a communist dictatorship. Some analysts had advised against such Yugoslav aid. They had worried that such aid might provoke the Soviet invasion. But the policy went ahead. NATO also prepared its own contingency military plans for a Yugoslav war, centering on the Ljubljana Gap (in present-day Slovenia). The plans included contingencies for possible U.S. use of nuclear weapons. Soviet agents may have been aware of these plans.

In 1951, as the U.S. government looked around at other dangers beyond Korea, there was only one main vector for possible enemy escalation. It was in Europe. In 2024, the situation is more complicated. Today, my measure of "serious possibility" is more Nietzsche's than Kent's. To me, a serious possibility of worldwide warfare may be *only* in the 20–30 percent range. But that assessment is not reassuring.

In February 2021, a year before it happened, I would have placed no higher odds than that in favor of a comprehensive Russian invasion of Ukraine, an invasion that would follow the public announcement of a Chinese-Russian partnership "without limits."⁶ We

can all reflect on what we misjudged back in early 2021.

Today the United States has to examine at least four main vectors for enemy escalation. These could involve Russia, China, Iran (including Israel), and North Korea, on their own or linked in some way.

The Ties that Sometimes Bind

Speaking to Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow in February 2023, China's top diplomat, Wang Yi said, "Crisis and chaos appear repeatedly before us, but within crisis there is opportunity." Wang was stressing their shared understanding that they are making choices at a momentous and fateful time.

All three of the major anti-American partnerships during the last hundred years were founded on a common core. In each case, the partners believe that the United States is the leader or anchor of a domineering imperial or neo-imperial system. They believe this hegemonic system strains in every way to block or strangle their nation's aspirations. They rally others to their cause, to the resistance, others who also feel oppressed.

That is the core. Beyond that core, though, the partnerships may not have any master plan or planners. Historically, the partners rarely trusted each other. They often do not even like each other.

Historical analogies are only useful for suggesting what is possible, not what is probable. They are better for opening minds with questions, not for closing minds with presumed answers. Recalling this history of past anti-American partnerships illustrates opportunism, constant strategic calculation and recalculation, divided counsels, and the potential for quick, dramatic changes.

Putin and Xi Jinping, and their circles, carefully study this history, at least their version of it. In Putin's case, the interest is obsessive. It is colored by both a Russian nationalist sensibility and his lingering Germanophilia.⁸

The American view of the history draws a clear separation between the Axis powers of the 1930s and 1940s and the Communist bloc during the high Cold War. Yet U.S. adversaries see these conflicts differently.

From *their* point of view these sets of struggles had a lot of continuity. To them, in both cases strange bedfellows got together to resist domineering imperi-

5 From notes of Stalin's remarks in Romanian records, quoted in Mark Kramer, "Stalin, the Split with Yugoslavia, and Soviet -East European Efforts to Reassert Control, 1948-1953," in Mark Kramer and Vit Smetana, eds., *Imposing, Maintaining, and Tearing Open the Iron Curtain: The Cold War and East-Central Europe, 1945-1989* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), note 25.

6 "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development" (February 4, 2022), <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.

7 Wang quoted in Christian Shepherd & Vic Chiang, "A year later, China blames U.S. 'hegemony' - not Russia - for war in Ukraine," *Washington Post*, February 22, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/02/22/china-us-blame-ukraine-war/>.

8 In 2020, I analyzed and replied to Putin's extraordinarily elaborate views on the origins of the World War II. "Lessons from the Second World War: A Reply to President Putin," *The American Interest*, July 2020, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2020/07/31/a-reply-to-president-putin/>. My reply was noticed in Moscow and published in Russian, in *Russia in Global Affairs*.

alists, to achieve true independence, and gain control of, or at least a rightful share in running, the reigning world order. That is why many in India sympathize with their countrymen who joined Imperial Japan to fight Britain. And, today, many in South Africa (and India) sympathize with their old friends, the Russians.

The anti-imperialists, the anti-hegemonists, all focus on America as the anchor and symbol of what they resent — the supposed confinement, power wrapped in pieties, opposing national assertion by new great powers. In the 1930s and 1950s, the British and French empires shared this role as objects of resentment and targets for revolution. Like the old, the new anti-hegemonists all glorify war and sacrifice in their public culture.

For their part, it was Britain and France who thought Germany would be deterred. They had evidence that the German high command thought it would lose a new war against Britain and France.

The anti-American leaders like Putin and Xi do not have as much personal experience of war and violence as leaders like Adolf Hitler, Stalin, Mao Zedong, or Benito Mussolini did (though there are some exceptions in Iran). The new generation of anti-American leaders are feeling their way. They are trying out a manner of behavior, an attitude that they have read about, perhaps admired, and certainly wondered about. They are wondering if it is their historical mission to usher in a new age of what they may think of as necessary violence. We in America, for our part, are trying to keep such a new age at bay.

By 1933, there were four major powers who resented the prevailing world order. Japan had launched a limited war against China in 1931, expanded it in 1932–33, and expanded it to all-out war in 1937.

It was Italy that then followed Japan's lead in starting a war for new empire. After the bloody conquest of Ethiopia, it was Italy that became the Spanish fascists' heavyweight ally in the Spanish Civil War, though the Germans supplied an air contingent.

Late to rearm, the Germans were latecomers to the fight against the prevailing world powers. The

Soviets, who shared such grievances, bided their time and, in 1939, put their support up for bids.

Back then, common resentments did not necessarily cement the core. The old Axis was slow to come together tightly. They never were that close in the practical dimensions of defense-industrial cooperation, though the German-Soviet industrial partnership was important while it lasted.

By contrast, today in 2024, key countries in the anti-American partnership have been working quite closely together in defense-industrial cooperation — extending across Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea. They have now been cooperating for a longer time, and in more ways, than was the case among any of the future Axis countries of the 1930s.

In the old Axis, there was plenty of distrust. The Italians generally disliked the Germans. They had recently fought them in the Great War. Italy had its own aspirations, both in Africa and in the Adriatic/Mediterranean world. Mussolini remained neutral when European war began in 1939. Japan was neutral too.

When Germany invaded Poland, that plan had been hatched exclusively in Berlin. It didn't have a long gestation. Poland had been friendly toward Hitler in 1938. But it would not become a German satellite. Hitler settled on an invasion plan against Poland in the spring of 1939.

That same spring, Italy had its own plans. It moved across the Adriatic to invade Albania.

Just before Germany invaded Poland, Hitler told his Italian friends he would do this. He thought Britain and France would stay out, deterred by Germany's partnership with the Soviet Union. Italy had just concluded a "Pact of Steel" with Hitler in May 1939. But Mussolini vacillated about joining in Hitler's war and in the last week of August, appalled that Hitler was really going through with his plans, he told Hitler he was not ready to join a war.⁹

For their part, it was Britain and France who thought Germany would be deterred. They had evidence that the German high command thought it would lose a new war against Britain and France. Their evidence was accurate. Some top generals even plotted to kill Hitler to prevent such a suicidal war. Yet, though he paused for a few days after getting the news from Italy and realizing that the British and French were determined, Hitler was not deterred.

As the Axis was taking shape and war loomed in 1939, Britain and France did maneuver to try to win the Soviet Union over to their side. The French

⁹ The Italian-German maneuvers are concisely summarized in Zara Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History 1933-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 844-55, 999.

were serious. But the British were not. The Soviets were not. And the Poles, with their history, wanted nothing to do with the Soviet Union or the Red Army.

The British of 1939 treated the negotiation of such an alliance with the Soviet Union as play-acting. The British hoped their play-acting with the Soviets might actually be an inducement for Hitler. They hoped it might persuade Hitler to make another deal (Munich-style) that might avert war at Poland's expense. They hoped Hitler would accept their invitation to send Hermann Goering to London to make this deal with Neville Chamberlain. Instead, Hitler sent Joachim von Ribbentrop to Moscow.

The whole story, from 1937 through June 1941, was then one where there was a revisionist core. Yet that core then was looser and less harmonized than the one that exists now.

So, London and Paris saw “the game” in 1939 as “one of pressure and counter-pressure, as a ‘war of nerves’ in which steadfastness and tenacity would prevail ... The Poles shared this view, opposing their own sense of *amour-propre* and honour to the situation,” wrote Donald Cameron Watt. “The notion that Hitler was intent not on winning the diplomatic game so much as on knocking the table over, drawing his gun and shooting it out, was one they understood intellectually but not in their hearts.”¹⁰

When Germany invaded Poland, its closest partner was the Soviet Union. Moscow had a more active partnership with Hitler, economically and militarily, than Rome or Tokyo did. The Soviet Union supplied vital raw materials. Germany, in return, provided a wish list of advanced military designs and manufactured goods.

In the second German-Soviet agreement, in September 1939, they agreed on the extinction of Poland. And Stalin sent back to Hitler, as a gift, thousands of Germans who had taken refuge in the Soviet Union. In July 1940, Stalin bluntly told the British ambassador, “We must change the old balance of power in Europe, for it has acted to the USSR's disadvantage.”¹¹

Stalin was not naïve about Hitler. But, as Stalin explained to his colleagues at the time, he was coming to regard the Nazi leader as a strategic partner in

a wider effort for the ‘have-nots’ to take down the great European powers, including the British Empire.

Stalin felt he also had to oppose the Japanese imperialists. The Soviet Union fought two border wars with Japan in 1938 and 1939 and was a key arms supplier for Nationalist China. Until 1938, Nationalist China's other key arms supplier was Nazi Germany. This made sense to both the Soviets and the Germans. After all, Nationalist China then regarded itself as a kindred revolutionary and anti-imperialist state, opposing predations from Japanese and British imperial interests.

The other revisionist powers, Italy and Japan, remained carefully neutral until June 1940, when France fell. That event reshaped the emergent Axis. It is when Italy fully joined Germany. Italy then took a piece of France and turned its attentions to Greece. Italy did this without Germany's interest or approval. Germany then had to conquer all the Balkan countries who were not already its allies, and intervene in north Africa, as Italy got in trouble and German oil in Romania seemed threatened by British moves toward the Balkans.

Japan joined what had become an “Axis,” but it did not join the war. Stalin used his partnership with Hitler to neutralize the Japanese threat to the Soviet Union. In exchange for a treaty of neutrality with Japan, Stalin cut off his assistance to China.

Thus, in the autumn of 1940, it appeared that the Axis might coalesce to include all four of these major powers. In November 1940, Stalin agreed to Germany's proposal that the Soviet Union become the fourth major Axis power. He had conditions in Europe (to do with Finland, Bulgaria, and the Dardanelles), the Middle East (from the trans-Caucasus to the Persian Gulf), and Japan (north Sakhalin). Japan and Italy were generally supportive.

The last two concessions were a good fit for German plans, but Hitler would not make further concessions in Europe. Hitler did not engage with Stalin's requests. Hitler's high command, particularly the Army staff, had offered him plans that promised a rapid defeat of the Soviet Union. Hitler endorsed them.

So, the final form of the “Axis” crystallized only in 1941. The potential Axis had split. But no one in the free world could take credit for that.

The whole story, from 1937 through June 1941, was then one where there was a revisionist core. Yet that core then was looser and less harmonized than the one that exists now. Its leaders displayed a capacity

10 Donald Cameron Watt, *How War Came: The Immediate Origins of the Second World War* (London: Pimlico Press, 1989), 536-37.

11 Stephen Kotkin, *Stalin: Waiting for Hitler, 1929-1941* (London: Penguin Random House, 2017), 777. Kotkin is best for the reconstruction of Stalin's calculations.

for strategic opportunism, wishful thinking, rapid turnabouts, and decisive action.

That sort of twisty plotline played out again in its last great chapter of maneuver, the choices that led to war against the United States.

The Choices to Attack America

The Axis, against old empires and creators of new ones, thought they had to throw off and balance American economic and cultural power and be able to confront its military power if that materialized. They also disliked the Roosevelt administration.

But the Axis powers all respected American industrial potential. They hoped America would decide to stay in its hemisphere and mind its own business. They were not sure just when or whether they should do anything that would bring the United States into the war. Thus, though each side started from a posture of basic hostility, they had to make new choices. The United States decided to arm Germany's enemies. And it decided not to abandon beleaguered China.

In the neutral U.S. government of 1941, no one seriously contemplated any political outreach to Hitler. Instead, Franklin D. Roosevelt did try hard to find an accommodation with Japan. His efforts in the first half of 1941 were entirely fruitless. In July, emboldened by German successes, Japan moved into southern Indochina. The United States cut off vital oil supplies.

The U.S. oil sanctions on Japan shocked leaders in Tokyo. They recalculated. Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro reconstituted his government and booted out the notoriously pro-Axis foreign minister. He embarked on an effort to fashion a grand bargain at a Konoe-Roosevelt summit meeting, which Roosevelt considered. But the diplomacy to prepare such a meeting (to occur in Juneau in October) foundered at the end of September.¹²

At all times Japan was prepared to negotiate about Indochina. It was even prepared to forego the great plans for the southward advance into resource-rich British and Dutch colonies. But Japan was *not* prepared to yield its domination of China.

When Konoe's government failed in its diplomacy with America, the Japanese recalculated again. An entirely new cabinet took power in October 1941. It had a new prime minister and yet another foreign minister. Tokyo redoubled its efforts, diplomatically and militarily. The new government decided that it

would either conclude a deal by the end of November — even a temporary one — or it would go to war.

In this crunch time, the United States still would not write China off. This U.S. commitment to China was not well-understood at the time or by historians now. For Roosevelt, the commitment mainly arose from his complex calculations about the war in Europe — the need to keep the Soviet Union from collapse and therefore the need to keep Japanese troops tied down in China.¹³ It is worth recalling today, as Russia and China confront the United States, that the proximate reason for America's entry into World War II was its determination to save those two countries from extinction.

Yet for the United States, that determination created an acute global dilemma. The United States had prioritized Germany as the likely main enemy. Its strategy for Japan was deterrence. By October 1941, it became more and more apparent that the U.S. deterrent strategy might fail. So Roosevelt seriously considered a temporary deal to relax sanctions on Japan, at China's expense.

The U.S. Army and U.S. Navy supported such a deal, if only to buy time. They feared they might be embroiled in the wrong war against the wrong enemy on the wrong side of the world. The possible deal, called a "*modus vivendi*," leaked. Amid the domestic furor and British and Chinese complaints during that fateful last week of November, Roosevelt decided: No deal.

Roosevelt's reasoning was complex and global. The U.S. decision to turn down the deal with the Japanese was meant to prevent a Chinese collapse. It thus helped pin down a million Japanese troops that the Americans thought might otherwise be deployed against the Soviets.

Fortunately, for reasons that no outsider really understood at the time, Hitler declared war on the United States. This German declaration was a kind of surprise. Throughout 1941 Hitler had deliberated on when or whether either Germany or Japan should go to war with the United States, vacillating back and forth.

Hitler did regard the United States as an ultimate enemy. But, contrary to what some historians have contended, Hitler — who paid close attention to microeconomic issues — had a deep regard for the military and industrial potential of the United States.

Once the United States adopted its enormous Lend-Lease program in March 1941, Hitler assumed,

12 Ian Kershaw provides a good overview of *Fateful Choices: Ten Decisions that Changed the World, 1940-1941* (London: Penguin, 2007), with the refinements noted below about the November 1941 choices. Good recent summaries of the Japanese background are Eri Hotta, *Japan 1941: Countdown to Infamy* (London: Random House, 2013) and Takuma Melber, *Pearl Harbor: Japan's Attack and America's Entry into World War II*, trans. Nick Somers (Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

13 This judgment is based on my own research in the sources. It dovetails with the argument perceptively made in Waldo Heinrichs, *Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt & American Entry into World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) and ably elaborated recently by Richard Frank, *Tower of Skulls: A History of the Asia-Pacific War, July 1937-May 1942* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2020), chapters 8 and 9.

as Putin now does, that he was effectively in a kind of war with the United States. Yet Hitler wished to put off any direct warfare with the United States.

By late October 1941, Hitler still seemed willing to put up with American provocations and leave the ultimate war against America to “the next generation.” In early November, his foreign minister was pointing the Japanese toward the British and Dutch, urging them to avoid any attack on America.

Yet Hitler’s calculations about both a Japanese and German war with America finally turned around. This happened, decisively, during the second half of November 1941.¹⁴ Why then? Washington rescinded the Neutrality Acts on Nov. 13. That move would, for the first time, bring U.S. convoys into the western approaches near Britain and likely lead to clashes in 1942 unless Germany abandoned its Battle for the Atlantic.

With its final diplomatic cards having just been laid on the table in Washington, having set an internal deadline for a war decision, Japan began final preparations for possible war with America. On Nov. 20, Japan asked Germany to join in. Hitler therefore also had that request pending.

Finally, the latest news of German military progress in the Soviet campaign seemed to clear the way. Berlin did not expect to conclude the Soviet campaign in 1941, regardless of whether or not German forces took Moscow. But Berlin did assess that the Red Army was essentially broken. Germany’s 1942 campaigns would just have to mop up. That remained the prevailing assessment in Hitler’s headquarters until Dec. 18.

So, toward the last week of November, Hitler had said yes to Tokyo. Japan, disappointed by its final diplomatic failure in Washington, set loose its war plans. Elated by their attack on Pearl Harbor, Hitler then made his declaration of war on Dec. 11.

It was only about a week after that, in the second half of December, that Hitler started receiving the full news of the weight of the Soviet counteroffensive, even though those attacks had actually begun on Dec. 5. This rough news from the East was joined by other unpleasant disillusionments, about the U-boat program and developments in war industry.

Confiding to his intimates on Jan. 15, 1942, Hitler worried aloud that he might have erred. He wondered if the odds might now favor an eventual American victory. But Hitler had not declared war on the United States because of nihilistic fanaticism. He had carefully calculated. He had calculated wrong.

The Early Cold War and the Next Stage of Enemy Partnerships

Whatever one’s view of the possibilities for a cooperative world order after the defeat of the Axis, a revisionist partnership was soon reforged. The revisionists were again unified by opposition to what they saw as an oppressive imperialist/capitalist order, led by the United States, which they argued was in league with the decaying European empires and revived reactionary forces in Germany and Japan.

This anti-American partnership was at its height between 1948 and 1962. Again, this was a time of strategic opportunism, profound miscalculation, rapid decisions, and decisive action.

But Hitler had not declared war on the United States because of nihilistic fanaticism. He had carefully calculated. He had calculated wrong.

The new partnership coalesced as the Chinese communists defeated the nationalists and won their civil war in 1948–49. Codified in a public partnership announced in Moscow in 1949, the Stalin-Mao partnership certainly had its own legacy of distrust. Stalin had hedged his bets until 1947, and perhaps even later than that. But by 1949 all was forgiven between Stalin and Mao. Stalin’s position was firmly preeminent. His satellites understood what party discipline meant.

In January 1950, Stalin decided to approve the invasion of South Korea. He summoned North Korean leader Kim Il Sung to Moscow so Stalin could personally and secretly explain his reasoning and plans in detail. Listen to Stalin’s explanation of how he sized up the situation:

China is no longer busy with internal fighting and can devote its attention and energy to the assistance of Korea. If necessary, China has at its disposal troops which can be utilized in Korea without any harm to the other needs of China. The Chinese [civil war] victory [in 1949] is also important psychologically. It has proven the strength of Asian revolutionaries, and shown the weakness of Asian reactionaries and their mentors in the West, in America. Americans left

14 In a large literature, the close analysis of Hitler’s choices and available information that now supersedes all others is Klaus Schmider, *Hitler’s Fatal Miscalculation: Why Germany Declared War on the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

China and did not dare to challenge the new Chinese authorities militarily. [This U.S. stance had surprised Mao, who had expected a large, direct U.S. military intervention in the civil war.]

Now that China has signed a treaty of alliance with the USSR, Americans will be even more hesitant to challenge the Communists in Asia. According to information coming from the United States, it is really so. The prevailing mood is not to interfere. Such a mood is reinforced by the fact that the USSR now has the atomic bomb and that our positions are solidified in Pyongyang.

However, we have to weigh once again all the 'pros' and 'cons' of the liberation. First of all, will Americans interfere or not? Second, the liberation can be started only if the Chinese leadership endorses it.¹⁵

Mao did indeed endorse the plan. There are striking features of the Soviet-Chinese planning of this period worthy of notice and reflection. First, the Soviet-Chinese planning occurred at a time when both countries were still very badly damaged, in every possible way, by their recent wars. There were members of the leadership group in both countries who were anxious to first heal such wounds. These men were also apprehensive about new wars that might involve the United States. They were overruled.

In September 1950, Stalin decided that China should join the Korean war and defeat the Americans. China's homeland would be sheltered from American counterattack by the Soviet alliance.

Second, the pace of Soviet-Chinese planning was remarkably rapid and decisive. The Berlin blockade came in 1948. The Chinese won the civil war in 1949 and the Soviets tested an atomic bomb. Settling the failed Berlin blockade, Stalin concluded his defense alliance with Mao.

And finally, they planned *three* major operations in east Asia in 1950: a North Korean invasion of the

South with China pledged to back the play if needed; a Chinese invasion of Taiwan later in the year; and a Viet Minh revolution against the French in Indochina, using Chinese sanctuaries, advisers, and weapons.

In 1950, the United States ended up fighting in Korea, blocking the Taiwan move with naval forces, and reluctantly deciding to support the French in Indochina. Washington reversed its earlier decisions, in 1949, that it would not do any of these things.

This American resolve may have surprised Stalin. He had a chance to evaluate this and recalculate. He and Mao also began thinking hard about what they thought would be the coming revival of Japanese or German power.

Stalin's reaction was to double down. In September 1950, Stalin decided that China should join the Korean war and defeat the Americans. China's homeland would be sheltered from American counterattack by the Soviet alliance.

We can eavesdrop again on how Stalin sized up this new situation, writing very secretly to Mao:

1. the USA, as the Korean events showed, is not ready at present for a big war;

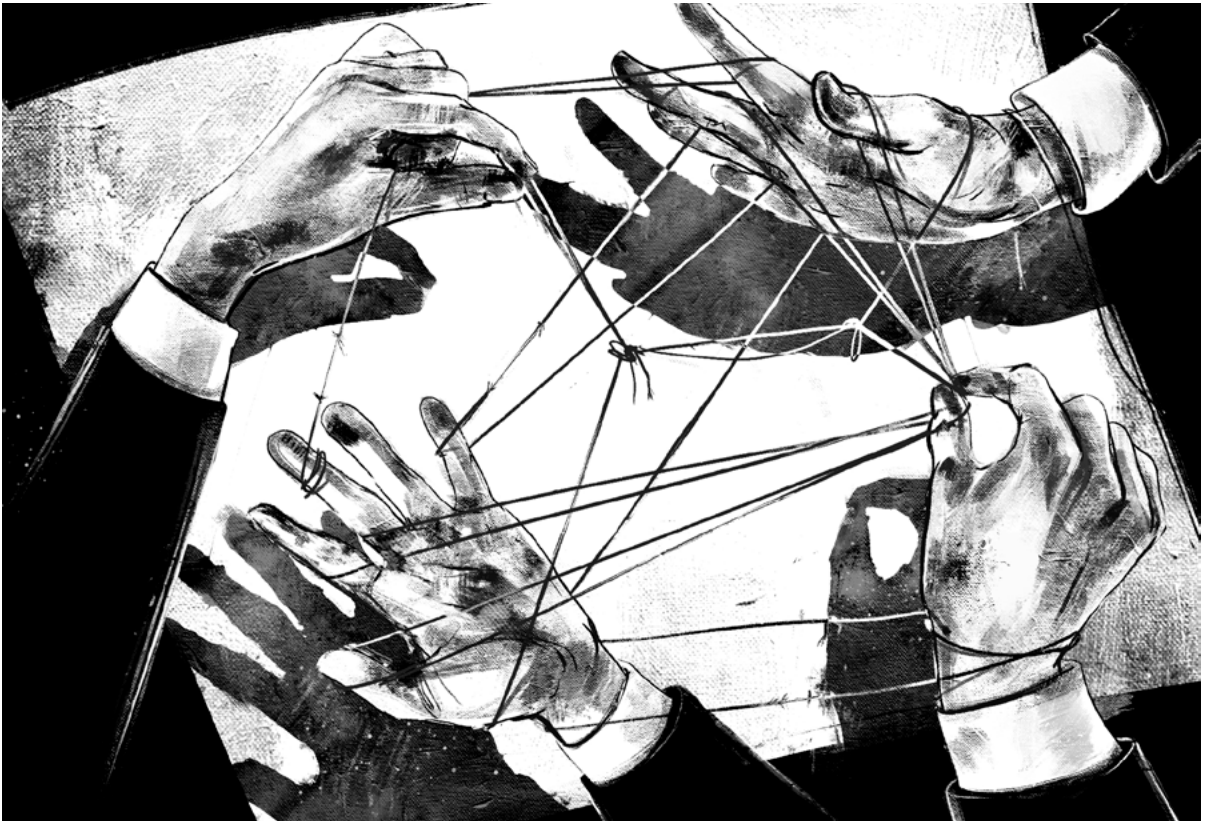
2. Japan, whose militaristic potential has not yet been restored, is not capable of rendering military assistance to the Americans;

3. the USA will be compelled to yield in the Korean question to China behind which stands its ally, the USSR ...;

4. for the same reasons, the USA will not only have to abandon Taiwan, but also to reject the idea of a separate peace with the Japanese reactionaries ...

Of course, I took into account also that the USA, despite its unreadiness for a big war, could still be drawn into a big war out of prestige which, in turn, could drag China into the war, and along with this draw into the war the USSR, which is bound with China by the Mutual Assistance Pact. Should we fear this? In my opinion, we should not, because together we will be stronger than the USA and England, while the other European capitalist states (with the exception of Germany which is unable to provide any assistance to the United States now) do not present serious military forces. If a war is inevitable, then let it be waged now, and not in a few

¹⁵ From the Soviet records of discussions with Kim in April 1950, unearthed by Evgenii Bajanov & Natalia Bajanova and published in Kathryn Weathersby, "Should We Fear This? Stalin and the Danger of War with America," *Cold War International History Project Working Paper No. 39*, July 2002, 9. When Stalin referred to "information coming from the United States," he was not only referring to Dean Acheson's famous press conference in January 1950 drawing a defense line that excluded Korea and Taiwan. Stalin was probably also referring to his knowledge of the contents of the secret U.S. decision document, NSC-48, of December 1949, that had first codified this U.S. government conclusion. The contents of NSC-48 may have been passed to Soviet intelligence by Kim Philby.



*years when Japanese militarism will be restored as an ally of the USA*¹⁶

Overcoming sharp disagreements among China's leaders, Mao went forward with the plan to join the war. The Chinese offensive was barely contained. The U.S. seriously considered nuclear escalation in Asia and mobilized for World War III.

Then, as mentioned earlier, in January 1951 Stalin accelerated planning for an imminent invasion of Yugoslavia. Later that year, Stalin paused.

A tense equilibrium seemed to slowly develop during 1951 and 1952. Why? Perhaps it was the product of further Chinese defeats in Korea. Maybe the scale of U.S. and NATO aid for Yugoslavia helped. Then there was the scale and rapidity of the Western mobilization for general war, the extensive deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons, and the Western determination evident in the appointments of Dwight Eisenhower and Bernard Montgomery to lead the newly mobilized NATO forces.

The confrontation revived between 1958 and 1962. Growing tension between the Soviet Union and China made the dangers worse, as each power wished to

show that it was the true leader of the world revolution. Beijing courted war over Taiwan and helped sponsor renewed war in Indochina. Moscow threatened war over Berlin — to win a battle over the future of Germany and show that America's nuclear threats in defense of allies were hollow. Only at the end of 1962, when Moscow stepped back from the brink, did the threat of World War III start to recede.¹⁷

The Anti-American League Now

“Everything is changing now, changing very fast.” Those were Putin's words a year after he had begun the full invasion of Ukraine. In some periods of history, events seem to accelerate. My working hypothesis is that, as 2022 began, the anti-American partnership was in an upbeat mood. They thought that, since 2014, their various limited offensive moves had worked and that the West was bribable or tearing itself up.

The free world's adversaries had their “coming out” party in 2022. That was a bad year for them. The free world did well that year.

16 Stalin to Mao, October 7, 1950, included in Stalin's letter later that day to his man in Pyongyang, Terenty Shtykov, in Alexandre Mansourov, “Stalin, Mao, Kim, and China's Decision to Enter the Korean War, September 16–October 15, 1950: New Evidence from the Russian Archives,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 6/7 (1995–96), 116.

17 On the Sino-Soviet break as a spur to confrontation, see Thomas Christensen, *Worse than a Monolith: Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011). For the best studies so far of Khrushchev, Berlin, and the linked crises of 1962, see Gerhard Wettig, *Chruschtschows Berlin-Krise 1958 bis 1963* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006); and Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War: The Inside Story of an American Adversary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), chapters 17 and 18.



In 2023, however, its adversaries did much better, especially by their lights. They feel it. They also feel the momentum of the rising tide of violence around the world.

The course of 2024 is still unsettled. It is still too soon to judge how the war will develop in Ukraine or in the Middle East.

Under their current leaders, America's principal adversaries — China and Russia — are fundamentally revisionist powers. Their leaders regard themselves as men of destiny, with values and historical perspectives quite different from the consumerist or social metrics that suffuse much of the world. During the last two years they, Iran, and North Korea have intensified their common work to shore up weaknesses in each other's defense-industrial bases, with Russia the most active entrepreneur.

All feel boxed in by extensions of American power they regard as fragile, though formidable in parts. All have long been preparing for a great reckoning. They wonder: Is now the time? If not soon, when?

The United States does not have the strategic initiative in the present conflict. It is reacting to choices made by others, which its analysts may not anticipate and understand.

It is possible to argue a relatively benign case in which the conflicts do not get much worse during 2024, or even 2025. There are economic worries. There are factions in all the adversary countries, especially in the administrative and business class, whose outlook is narrowly focused and fundamentally inertial. Their outlooks might seem sensible to us.

Yet there are many historical cases in which dictators did not do what seemed sensible to well-informed outside specialists.¹⁸ Above all, a deep historian of the topic has observed, "dictators who surround themselves with a cult of personality tend to drift off into a world of their own, confirmed in their delusions by the followers who surround them."¹⁹

The default assumption in national assessment is to hypothesize the position of governments and generalize about their national interests. Yet all the relevant governments have factions that may disagree quite fundamentally about what the interests are, how they should be pursued, and what risks should be accepted.

These factional debates are difficult for outsiders to see or gauge. Their outcomes often crystallize opportunistically and unpredictably around somebody's proposal or some external development that forces choices.

The joint British-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt in the Suez Crisis of 1956 is mainly remembered now as a mistake by the British government. Yet the plan was actually developed by factions in the French and Israeli governments. Washington knew nothing of it. The French and Israelis developed their plan at a time that the United States had justifiably concluded that the crisis was being settled with diplomacy.

France was the indispensable organizer — the Israelis and British detested each other. Yet in the French case the idea ran exactly counter to what the French foreign ministry wanted. The French and Israeli factions, mainly in the military and intelligence services, sold their joint plan to a faction of one in the British government (Prime Minister Anthony Eden), and brought along the somewhat reluctant French and Israeli prime ministers.²⁰

The United States does not have the strategic initiative in the present conflict. It is reacting to choices made by others, which its analysts may not anticipate and understand. U.S. and allied planners can

hope for the best and plan for the worst.

Under the category of "best," there are two families of relatively benign expectations, which are not necessarily consistent. One is that America's adversaries think they are already doing pretty well. They find current trends satisfactory. They will watch as Ukrainian resistance ebbs and fractures, as "the West" grows tired and quarrels, and as Israel tears itself apart. Meanwhile they will keep building their strength.

Or, some may think U.S. adversaries have been sobered by recent setbacks, problems at home, and demonstrations of U.S. and allied resolve. They find current trends unsatisfactory, but tolerable. So they may decide to retrench, cope with sanctions regimes,

18 Among the more famous assessment debates and misjudgments about "rational" versus actual choices were about German aims in 1938; Japanese aims in 1941; the Soviet-sponsored invasion of South Korea in 1950 (which made no sense at the time even to Stalin's colleague, Khrushchev); the Chinese entry into that war in 1950; the Soviet deployment of ballistic missiles to Cuba in 1962; the North Vietnamese escalation of war in South Vietnam in 1965–66; and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 (when the U.S. intelligence community had good evidence that the Soviet establishment opposed such an invasion).

19 Frank Dikötter, *Dictators: The Cult of Personality in the 20th Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 206.

20 If this summary seems surprising, see Philip Zelikow, Ernest May, and the Harvard Suez Team, *Suez Deconstructed: An Interactive Study of Crisis, War, and Peacemaking* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2018).

let the Russo-Ukrainian war peter out, and consolidate their position across Eurasia and in the global South.

Both of these kinds of reassuring arguments are plausible. They are plausible enough that they are likely already being voiced by factions in Beijing, Moscow, or Tehran.

Yet some enemy factions likely have a different view. They find current trends infuriating. These Russians and Iranians see no way out of jail. They find the prospect of stalemate against their main adversaries to be intolerable. These Chinese see a slow buildup of encircling alliances, a rearming Japan, a slowly mobilizing Taiwan, and American plans for high-tech countermoves and containment. These enemy factions would be searching for plausible moves of their own.

Under the category of “worst,” I believe that, on current trend lines, Putin is content to grind away against Ukraine, whose forces are depleted and exhausted and whose economy withers. Putin sees no reason, yet, to think he must conclude the war.

Why is this so important for situations beyond Ukraine? The Ukraine war has already created a more fluid strategic environment. It has already caused a visible closing of ranks on both sides.

Putin has already traveled to Tehran for personal confidential conversations with Iran’s leaders, where the ascension of Ebrahim Raisi in June 2021 began a period of intensifying relations with other members of what Iran regards as the “resistance” front. Putin’s discussions with Xi have surely been “strategic” (the Russian government’s description).

I believe the anti-American partnership has probably decided to double down. They are probably preparing in earnest for a period of major confrontation. My view on this rests on my analysis of the history presented above as well as some key assessments of Moscow, Tehran, Beijing, and — to a lesser extent — Pyongyang.

Xi and Putin regard themselves as world-historical men of destiny. They believe they are capable of decisive, strategic action. Xi ranks himself with Mao and Stalin. Putin evokes the memory of Peter the Great. In China, Russia, and Iran the information and decision environments are cloistered.

In China, Russia, and Iran the propaganda ministries have already been preparing their populations for a time of war, great sacrifice, and existential struggle. Russia is becoming hyper-militarized. In China, most visible are the full cinemas watching blunt messages in massively popular and costly movies that were deliberate government projects, such as *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (the highest-grossing Chinese film of all time), its recent sequel (also one of the highest-grossing movies of all time), and *Full River Red* (last year’s top film).

Russia’s leaders regard themselves as now at war with “the West.” They now treat this as an existential struggle.²¹

Iran’s leaders similarly feel they are in an existential struggle for the survival of the revolution at home, while they are also engaged in their war with Israel. I believe that some Iranians have now stored up so much resentment and hatred that they may be desperate to do almost anything to get at Israel.

The North Korean intentions seem driven, but as opaque as usual. My working hypothesis is that they are preparing for a period of conflict and that they are wondering about possible opportunities to play an important role.

In each capital there are arguments for retrenchment on one side and, on the other, for more militancy. The more militant factions have likely been arguing and speculating about ways to turn over the table.

Beijing’s outlook both the most important and the most difficult to assess, since its government has visibly sought a policy of “peaceful coexistence” with the United States. I think it is most likely that Beijing has assessed that the die has been cast for a period of escalating confrontation.

The “San Francisco Vision”

On Dec. 4, 2023, the Chinese embassy in Washington sent a letter to select Americans explaining their government’s view of the just-concluded summit with President Joe Biden in San Francisco (actually in Woodside, in San Mateo County). The Chinese regarded the summit as “historic,” that it “fostered a future-oriented San Francisco vision.”

In the Chinese version, they offer a path of mutual respect. Each side can “coexist in peace and pursue win-win cooperation.” Biden, the embassy explained, seemed to agree. He told them, they say, that the United States “does not seek a new Cold War, does not seek to change China’s system, does not seek to revitalize its alliances against China, does not support ‘Taiwan independence’, and has no intention to have a conflict with China.”

For its part, China says it is prepared to carry out its side of the San Francisco vision. China hopes the United States would do likewise, including that it will “abide by the one-China principle [and] stop arming Taiwan.”

In 2023, Chinese leaders made a strategic choice to replace defiant “wolf warriors” with peace offerings, extending olive branches, inviting mutual cooperation and peaceful coexistence. In this strategy, the burden of choice thus shifts to the United States

21 Putin himself has made this point over and over again. See, e.g., Angela Stent, “Putin’s Next Term: Repression in Russia, Aggression in Ukraine,” United States Institute of Peace, March 19, 2024, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/03/putins-next-term-more-repression-russia-aggression-ukraine>.

and others to decide whether to accept these offers.

This Chinese articulation of their San Francisco vision bears a striking, eerie resemblance to the “spirit of Camp David.” That phrase, of Soviet coinage, arose in September 1959. The context was the first year of the second Berlin crisis. Eisenhower was doing all he could with diplomacy to ease the danger of war. He invited Khrushchev to the United States, to Camp David — a marked sign of respect. Khrushchev accepted, believing that he could persuade Eisenhower to give way on Berlin. Eisenhower did not give way, but his language was reassuring, looking toward a major international conference planned for the spring of 1960, in Paris.

Beijing seems to now be making an offer strikingly similar to the offer Moscow made back then. They offer peaceful coexistence, if only “the US will develop a right perception toward China, see China as its partner rather than rival.”

The Soviets thus spoke of the spirit of Camp David. They explained that they were offering America, and the world, “peaceful coexistence.” What did peaceful coexistence entail? It meant an end to imperialist-capitalist wars, accepting that nuclear weapons had ruled these out. It meant acceptance and recognition of the outcome of World War II, including the legitimacy of communist East Germany.²² It meant an end to occupation regimes. Foreign forces might withdraw from both German states. Imperialist-capitalist rule was in the process of being overthrown by revolutionary forces around the world. The world’s “have-nots” were claiming their rightful place. But that was a natural, inevitable historical process, and no occasion for international aggression or interference.

The spirit of Camp David lasted for about six months. It became obvious that the West would not concede its position in Berlin, a standoff of global

importance to both sides. The May 1960 Paris conference dissolved in acrimony. To many outsiders it made no sense that Khrushchev would not accept the *status quo* in Berlin. But the truly dangerous phases of the standoff were still to come.

Beijing seems to now be making an offer strikingly similar to the offer Moscow made back then. They offer peaceful coexistence, if only “the US will develop a right perception toward China, see China as its partner rather than rival.” And again, I believe, the Chinese will prefer to seem to be placing the burden of choice — on the status of Taiwan — on the United States.

To Americans it may seem like it is the Chinese who are the troublemakers, trying to disturb the *status quo*. That was John F. Kennedy’s argument to Khrushchev in their one meeting, in Vienna in June 1961. Khrushchev did not agree. He and the East Germans would only be asserting their legal rights, he explained. It was the United States that would then have to challenge that and start the war.

“You are trying to humiliate us,” Khrushchev replied. “You speak about your prestige but do take our prestige into account.” When Kennedy held firm, Khrushchev warned him, “Let the war happen now rather than later, when there will be even more horrible types of weapons.”²³

China’s leaders today respect American military and technological capabilities. They do not appear to be confident of victory in any scenario. These anxieties should not reassure us. They appear to take the Biden administration’s alliance and defense build-up plans quite seriously. From their point of view, the American-led enemy mobilization has already begun.

Chinese analysts might then offer several reasons for taking necessary actions sooner rather than later. Their actions will not cause a geopolitical break, because they believe this break has already occurred.

They see America already energetically organizing, with some effect, its global coalition to impose containment and strategic decoupling through technology and trade controls. For now, in this wartime environment, the European governments are deferring to the Americans, though many of their business leaders disagree.

They might also see that Americans and Europeans feel economically and financially fragile. They will be fearful of initiating a conflict that will immediately

22 At the time (1959) there was also a quite serious crisis still ongoing over Taiwan, where the Soviet and Chinese position was that the United States should accept the outcome of the Chinese civil war, recognize the People’s Republic of China, and grant its sovereignty over Taiwan. The Soviets had already provided the Chinese with designs for how to build nuclear weapons. But, in 1959, the Soviets refused Chinese requests to provide them with actual nuclear bombs.

23 From the Soviet memcon, June 4, 1961, as translated by Sergey Radchenko in his forthcoming book, *To Run the World*. During the summer and fall of 1961 both sides began mobilizing for war. Khrushchev postponed his moves because Kennedy opened a secret backchannel that Khrushchev thought might produce a deal. But it did not. As Soviet documents now reveal, in early 1962 Khrushchev renewed his preparations to prevail and deter America from initiating a war.

trigger an apocalyptic global economic and financial crisis. And if there is such a storm, Chinese leaders may believe they are better able to weather it. They have already been helping to establish a parallel global trading system to accommodate Russia, Iran, North Korea, and other victims of American sanctions.

And, of course, they cannot help but miss that the Ukraine crisis has shocked America into trying much harder to ramp up its defense-industrial base. This is a worrying development for China. The Americans might transform their capacity to produce long- or mid-range standoff precision munitions. But it will take some time for the Americans to do this. Even an extra year or two may make a difference.

Further, Japan is rearming. This could have huge consequences. It too will take time. To Chinese leaders, the Japanese turn may seem particularly ominous. Japan has also overcome historical grievances that have blocked close military and intelligence cooperation with South Korea.

The Americans now have a huge backlog of approved arms sales to Taiwan. Yet, for now, almost none of this has been delivered. Chinese leaders will prefer that none of it ever is. The Americans have secured planned bases in the Philippines. But they are not yet ready to use them. And the Americans are orchestrating new military combinations and exercises with their AUKUS partnership, the Quad, Japan, and South Korea.

What about China's most important partner? Right now, Putin's grip on power seems firm. That may not last indefinitely. For now, Putin's firm position means that China can rely on the Eurasian reserve of strategic resources that he represents, especially oil.

Beijing probably now regards the East Asian divide against them as already taking shape, with hostile forces starting to gather strength — with particular worries about Japan. The U.S. rallying of partners during 2022 and 2023 is probably reframing the way the Chinese now see their choices. These U.S. policy successes may strengthen the case of factions urging action sooner rather than later.

The Novelty of America's Position

A year before Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 14, 1940, the U.S. ambassador to Japan, Joseph Grew, penned a long letter to his old friend, Roosevelt. Grew had known Roosevelt since prep school days at Groton. He was

the only U.S. ambassador in the world who would open his letter to the president with, "Dear Frank."

"History has shown," Grew wrote, "that the pendulum in Japan is always swinging between extremist and moderate positions." Grew thought a "showdown" seemed to be coming — "the principal question at issue is whether it is to our advantage to have that showdown sooner or to have it later."

It is really hard, cognitively and institutionally hard, to hold open a doorway to the emptiness of what we don't know and adapt to changing circumstances.

More than a month later, on Jan. 21, 1941, after he had delivered a landmark fireside chat to the nation on Dec. 29, Roosevelt found time to send a long letter back to his old friend. To Roosevelt, "the fundamental proposition was that the hostilities in Europe, in Africa, and in Asia are all parts of a single world conflict."

After detailing some implications, Roosevelt concluded: "I am giving you my thoughts at this length because the problems which we face are so vast and so interrelated that any attempt even to state them compels one to think in terms of five continents and seven seas. In conclusion, I must emphasize that, our problem being one of defense, we cannot lay down hard-and-fast plans. As each new development occurs we must, in the light of the circumstances then existing, decide when and where we can most effectively marshal and make use of our resources."²⁴

Over time and in separate settings the U.S. government has laid down plans that, if not "hard-and-fast," may be cumulatively unsustainable in the present global situation.

The United States needs to be able to double-down in Europe while, in Asia and the Middle East, recalibrating how to "most effectively marshal and make use of our resources." This view is not driven by abstract notions of regional importance. It is driven by practical analysis of the stress tests.

For the Axis, even when their ranks seemed to include the Soviet Union, their underlying war production capabilities were not close to that of the mobilized United States.²⁵ And they never had a meaningful capability to attack the American homeland. In 1937–41 and in 1948–62, Americans felt that,

24 The correspondence was published in Joseph Grew, *Ten Years in Japan* (London: Hammond, Hammond & Co., 1944), 359–63.

25 Soviet war production capability during World War II is usually exaggerated in the literature. If properly estimated to account for the vast inputs involved in making aircraft and warships, Soviet productive capacity was comparable to that of Japan. The best work on this is now Phillips Payson O'Brien, *How the War Was Won: Air-Sea Power and Allied Victory in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

if they mobilized, their war production would be overwhelming and that their eventual striking power was limitless.

Americans are used to thinking of their defense position as mighty. The civilian population watches news about faraway wars and roots for this or that team — and they are always far away. Humility is applauded in principle. It is hard to practice it. It is not hard just because of arrogance or complacency. It is so hard because people are drowning in information and commentary. It is really hard, cognitively and institutionally hard, to hold open a doorway to the emptiness of what we don't know and adapt to changing circumstances.

China is preparing for war. I am not saying it seeks a war. But, publicly and privately, the Chinese Communist Party is mobilizing its country for one.

For the last 10 years, China has been working hard on preparing and refining its plans for national defense mobilization. This topic has repeatedly engaged Xi's personal attention. He does not appear to be satisfied. But he and his advisers can contrast their commitment and readiness for national mobilization with the comparable situation in the United States.²⁶

One lesson to them from the Ukraine war is the shallow and fragile character of the U.S. defense-industrial base. Chinese manufacturing capacity now exceeds both the United States and Europe put together.

Also, three of these adversaries each have numerous nuclear weapons. Another, Iran, is on the verge. Pakistan, which is not a friendly country, has plenty of nuclear weapons too. All the nuclear-armed states believe they may now be able to deter American attacks against their homeland. All of them — including Iran — believe they are effectively invulnerable to being invaded. They may therefore feel greater freedom to design and wage limited wars.

Americans may be presented with novel scenarios, bracketed by nuclear dangers, in relation to interests most of them do not care much about. Most living Americans no longer have a palpable memory of battlefield or national vulnerability. The magnitude of the 9/11 shock to American sensibilities proves the point in a way, and for younger Americans that is now vague history. U.S. adversaries believe, rightly

or wrongly, that they are tougher, and that their societies are tougher, readier to follow orders and handle hardship, than America's.

The Burden of Escalation Might Be on the United States

My working hypothesis is that its adversaries will not initiate a direct attack on the United States. No Pearl Harbor. Instead, such adversaries may see this as a time when it is America that will be restrained from initiating direct military actions in response to adversary moves that do not directly attack the United States.

Speculations about a possible war with China tend to assume a large Chinese attack of some kind. Yet this is contrary to Chinese strategic tradition. That tradition emphasizes planning for carefully limited wars. That is exactly what China has done in each of its military confrontations with the United States. Their military writings frequently emphasize what they call "war control."²⁷

China has fought America before. Their reading of this history is very different from the way these conflicts are usually taught in the United States. China has gone to war with the United States in Korea and in Vietnam and it has extended control over the South China Sea without a war.

In the indirect control scenario, China can then force the other countries (or Taiwan) to decide whether or how to challenge such a realization of the "one China" the world formally recognizes.

In Korea, the Chinese war was unofficial, conducted by "Chinese people's volunteers." The Soviet Union had promised a defense umbrella to ward off U.S. counterattacks against the Chinese homeland. That worked.

In Vietnam, the Chinese war was covert, conducted by hundreds of thousands of troops and workers operating only in North Vietnam and Laos. North Vietnam dispatched arms and troops to help conquer

26 E.g., John Pomfret and Matt Pottinger, "Xi Jinping Says He Is Preparing China for War," *Foreign Affairs*, March 29, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/xi-jinping-says-he-preparing-china-war>; or Kawala Xie, "China's Fujian province steps up defence mobilisation reforms to improve war readiness," *South China Morning Post*, February 3, 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3250840/chinas-fujian-province-steps-defence-mobilisation-reforms-bid-improve-war-readiness>; or Mike Studeman, "China is Battening Down for the Gathering Storm Over Taiwan," *War on the Rocks*, April 17, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/04/china-is-battening-down-for-the-gathering-storm-over-taiwan/>.

27 A summary is in Burgess Laird, *War Control: Chinese Writings on the Control of Escalation in Crisis and Conflict*, Center for a New American Security, March 30, 2017, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/war-control>. These writings tend to downplay some of the escalation risks that are highlighted in Western literature about limited war.

South Vietnam. This plan was launched in 1959. At least through 1966, China sheltered North Vietnam from conventional counter-invasion by the United States. China warned the United States that any such invasion would meet a full Chinese counterattack, Korea-style. These warnings worked. They effectively kept the United States at bay and confined the war's parameters in the way China wished.

In the South China Sea, the Chinese conquest did not meet military opposition. The occupation was conducted first as a civilian assertion of territorial rights. China strenuously denied any plans to militarize its outposts in the South China Sea. It then proceeded to full militarization, tolerating the occasional international protest cruises.

From the Chinese point of view, in an ideal case China might make its moves after being publicly provoked. In the 2021 Nancy Pelosi case, for instance, international opinion would have blamed the United States for causing the crisis. The Biden administration had to work hard to manage that crisis.

Another kind of opportunity for decisive action, from China's perspective, could be any U.S. attempt to make actual delivery of notable U.S. military equipment into Taiwan (ideally some kind of missiles — hence China could have its version of the America's 1962 Cuban missile "quarantine").

As an illustration of how to apply historical precedents to illuminate the challenge of global readiness, consider the U.S. commitment to Taiwan. This commitment is morally and politically justifiable. It may be hard to sustain, in practice. I see three main plausible scenarios:

1. *Pearl Harbor*. China combines an invasion of Taiwan with an attack on U.S. installations, at least in Guam, and possibly on Japanese territory as well. The United States, and possibly Japan, are immediately at war with China, with high likelihood of rapid escalation to general war.
2. *Korea 1950*. China attacks Taiwan, probably associated with preparations for invasion. Though, as in South Korea in 1950, the U.S. defense commitment is ambiguous, the brazen character of the attack raises the odds of at least U.S. and Japanese intervention, and

all prepare for the possibility of escalation to general war.

3. *Indirect control*. China implements air and sea border controls to make Taiwan a self-governing administrative region of China. There is no need for a direct attack on Taiwan or any blockade of usual commerce. Without initiating violent action, the Chinese can assert sovereign control over the air and sea borders to Taiwan, establishing customs and immigration controls. This is not the same thing as a blockade. A blockade would instead become one of the possible consequences if the other side violently challenged China's assertion of indirect control.²⁸

In the indirect control scenario, China can then force the other countries (or Taiwan) to decide whether or how to challenge such a realization of the "one China" the world formally recognizes. And China could violently retaliate against any Taiwanese air or sea units that violently challenged China's move.

Taiwan could keep governing itself, for a while. The situation would be similar, in substance, to the condition Hong Kong was in after the British relinquished control in 1997, except China would not need to raise its flag on the island itself. Taipei could file its protests and hold its demonstrations. But any Taiwanese military moves could trigger Chinese responses that Taiwan could not top. For instance, if Taiwan sought to cut off semiconductor exports to China, China could cut off all energy supplies to Taiwan, including the energy that runs its principal chip producer, TSMC. There is no plausible scenario in which Taiwan could force an outcome where it supplied the world, but not China. Eventually, China could steer Taiwan's semiconductor trade and access to its supply chains without touching the fabrication centers themselves.

America's military and 99 percent of the public commentary focus on the first two scenarios. The third one seems more likely to me.²⁹ It is doable now, with little warning. In every way, this is the easiest option for China to execute and defend publicly. In every way, it is the hardest option for the United States to counter. China is already rehearsing this option on a limited scale in controlling the waters

28 To illustrate what is or is not a "blockade": The 1948 Soviet cutoff of Western ground transport into West Berlin was a blockade. It was surmounted by an airlift until the blockade was lifted in 1949. The second Berlin crisis (November 1958 to November 1962) was *not* a threatened blockade. It was the threat to treat Allied-occupied West Berlin as now being part of communist East Germany (which the West would not recognize as a state), and thus turning over border controls that would stop the access of "outside" U.S., British, and French military forces into the middle of East Germany. It was these outsiders who would face restrictions, not ordinary commerce. In the proffered Soviet peace treaty West Berlin would become a "free city," nominally self-governing and with U.N. oversight. This second crisis was horrifyingly difficult for the Western powers, because the threatened move would force them to initiate the moves to fight their way into preserving access. Their plans involved escalating initiations of forceful efforts, culminating in an initial "demonstration" use of nuclear weapons by the United States.

29 For an earlier discussion of this indirect control scenario three years ago, then referred to as a "quarantine," see Robert Blackwill and Philip Zelikow, *The United States, China, and Taiwan: A Strategy to Prevent War*, Council on Foreign Relations Special Report no. 90 (2021), 35-36, <https://www.cfr.org/report/united-states-china-and-taiwan-strategy-prevent-war>.

around Taiwan's offshore island of Kinmen. This option might effectively accomplish China's objectives with the least danger of massive disruption and the best posture for escalation dominance, since the other options still remain.³⁰

Therefore, stepping back, the general American posture vis-à-vis Taiwan seems reminiscent of the second Berlin crisis of 1958–62, in which the burden of military escalation to preserve access would fall on the United States, which may or may not have Japanese support, and in an environment where a conventional fight to restore access seems very challenging. In that earlier Berlin crisis, facing a similarly forbidding conventional challenge, the United States ultimately relied on the threat, or bluff, that it would initiate the first use of nuclear weapons.³¹ That threat was thinly credible then, in a situation of U.S. nuclear advantages. Such a threat is inconceivable now. Yet, for good political as well as strategic reasons, the United States also can't and won't preemptively and visibly abandon Taiwan. As a practical matter, the dilemma is acute.

The United States therefore ought to deeply reexamine its strategy and strategic posture toward the whole Middle East region.

In other regions too, the more difficult scenarios may place the main burden of choosing violent escalation on the United States. Russia is already testing the limits of the West's capabilities to sustain Ukraine. They are pushing very hard during 2024. Their goal is to wear Ukraine down and fracture its politics, economy, and society. As one prominent Russian nationalist has explained, "In a year or two, the special military operation will have to be wound up with a decisive victory so that the present American and related comprador elites in Europe come to terms with the loss of their dominance and agree to a much

more modest position in the international system."³²

The situation in Europe is still retrievable. My suggestions on this front are familiar.³³ It will be a close call to see if military aid can shore up Ukraine's defenses. It may be an even closer call to see if the West can sustain the level of financial assistance vital to Ukraine, especially in 2025, as Europeans still wring their hands over whether and how to use the Russian financial assets frozen in their jurisdictions. The period of maximum danger may come if Ukraine's supporters are successful and Ukraine's position becomes sustainable and promising. Because then Russia will have to decide whether to escalate.³⁴

Some of the near-term danger is a byproduct of the administration's own policy achievements. Large Western defense buildups are now in motion. They may bear significant fruit in the out years, including the buildup in Europe and Ukraine — but not right away. More reason for Russians to push as hard as they can in 2024 and 2025.

In the Middle East, Iran can provoke with proxies, continue the renewal of its nuclear program that it accelerated in 2023, and dare exhausted, isolated Israel to attack. Iran can also dare the United States to join such a war in the Middle East. We can see how that war may start. The Iranians, or at least some faction of them, may think they see better how it will end.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates may be planning to stay out of such a war, as they conduct a diplomatic revolution in the Middle East. Their realignments include a detente with Iran, brokered with China. It includes understandings with China, Russia, and India that further guarantee their security. These Arab leaders think they are this era's Henry Kissingers, cleverly navigating and dominating the space between rivals.

The current Gaza and Israeli-Iranian war is affecting the domestic political situation in Iraq and Turkey. The scope of operations the United States can conduct out of Incirlik and Al-Udeid may become more constrained. The United States should not assume it can readily use either of those bases in

30 On China's new de facto border patrols around Kinmen, see Radio Free Asia, "Record number of Chinese ships enter Taiwan waters near Kinmen island," May 10, 2024, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/southchinasea/china-kinmen-intrusion-05102024034553.html>. For a good recent analysis of the military problems a quarantine or indirect control move might pose, see Robert Haddick with Mark Montgomery and Elaine Luria, "Quarantines and Blockades," in Matt Pottinger, ed., *The Boiling Moat: Urgent Steps to Defend Taiwan* (Hoover Institution, 2024), chapter 8.

31 This Berlin context is why the United States strained to assert, in 1961 and 1962, that it enjoyed nuclear superiority, so that its threats to escalate to nuclear war, to risk American survival, might seem credible. The Soviet government therefore strained in several ways, including eventually the secret deployment of missiles to Cuba, in order to dispel such images and make such threats seem less credible.

32 Sergei Karaganov, "An Age of Wars? Article One," *Russia in Global Affairs*, January 2024, p. 8 (translated).

33 For a three-page summary see Philip Zelikow, "The Atrophy of American Statecraft," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 103 no. 1 (January-February 2024): 56, 67-70, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/atrophy-american-statecraft-zelikow>.

34 For an example of this argument, see Peter Schroeder, "The Real Russian Nuclear Threat," *Foreign Affairs*, December 20, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/real-russian-nuclear-threat>.

certain contingencies involving Iran or obtain easy permission for certain airspace transits.

Greatly exacerbated by the Russo-Ukrainian war, Europe's current dependence on Middle Eastern, North African, and east Mediterranean gas and oil has become profound. European states will feel great pressure to avoid doing anything that might endanger these supplies.

Even a relatively limited war with China would almost automatically, practically overnight, lead to freezes or seizures of trillions of dollars' worth of Chinese and American assets of all kinds, with all sorts of counterparties caught in the whirlpools.

The United States therefore ought to deeply reexamine its strategy and strategic posture toward the whole Middle East region. A cornerstone principle for such a reexamination might be that the future viability of Israel itself is coming into play. Its current government is on a course that will isolate and weaken it, as its enemies gather. But any future Israeli government will face terrible choices, probably involving civil strife as in 1948, but much worse. The United States, like Israel, will need to focus more on the essential requirements of Israeli survival, at least as a free and promising society.

The United States should have plans for a possible war with Iran that do not assume or rely on initiation of a preventive war, either alone or in conjunction with Israel. Those plans may need to assume Iranian access to weapons of mass destruction. Those plans will also need to have a plausible concept for how such a war might end.

Wishful Thinking and the Alternatives

Though Americans have lost limited wars in which they chose to disengage, their historical memory encourages a belief that they have always projected sufficient power for great-power contests if only they will try hard enough.

America's adversaries have sometimes engaged in wishful thinking. The United States has certain-

ly shown it can do this too. If it faces the burden of choosing escalation, the political, financial, and industrial base to support such a choice is weaker than it was in past episodes.

Calls for massively larger military preparedness may be politically unrealistic. There is little net public support in the United States for further big increases in defense spending beyond current levels. Yet despite an

uptick in spending after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Michael Brown notes that "America has a smaller military with older and less equipment than at any time in memory."³⁵ Even if funded, plans for large expansions of naval or air power have a long lead time, looking at least into the 2030s. Even then the results may not provide the kind of capabilities that will solve the particular escalation choices that America faces. Depending on the scenario, the United States may also encounter severe practical issues in its internal decision processes, the preparedness of key allies, or the requirements of the military operations.

The worst case, in a major crisis, will be if the United States and its allies commit to victory, animated by their own rhetoric and dutiful but ill-considered military plans, and then are outmaneuvered and defeated. It would be the "Suez moment" for the United States, or perhaps much worse.

The United States may therefore need to prioritize action in the theaters and on the problems where its interests, allied readiness, and capabilities are at their height. Where they are more vulnerable, the United States may need to quietly rethink its current military plans. The current postures in the western Pacific and the Middle East may be especially unsound, depending on the situation.

One way to rethink the plans is to hedge the reliance on military insurance. For several reasons, the U.S. government has leaned too much on military capabilities to offset deep, chronic weaknesses in all its civilian institutions for foreign work. The United States is turning more frequently to economic sanctions. As the Ukraine case and the problem of Russian assets illustrates, this reliance has overwhelmed the capabilities, culture, and staffing of the usual bureaucracies handling these efforts, which in the U.S. case are mainly in the Treasury and Commerce departments. The overall capacity to guide these efforts strategically relies on a few overburdened civil servants.

By contrast, beginning in 1940 and accelerating in 1941, Roosevelt began creating quite new insti-

35 Michael Brown, "A Plan to Revitalize the Arsenal of Democracy," *War on the Rocks*, May 10, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/05/a-plan-to-revitalize-the-arsenal-of-democracy/>.

tutions for “economic warfare.” Boards and committees proliferated, and skilled brain trusts reset failing strategies.³⁶

A principal reason for the 1947 creation of a “National Security Council” was so that it would coordinate economic instruments of national power alongside the military ones, as the Americans had seen the British do so effectively in their War Cabinet system. That system in the United Kingdom had included a Ministry of Economic Warfare that recruited some of the most able people in Whitehall.

At the center of the American production bureaucracies was a man, now almost forgotten, named Ferdinand Eberstadt. He had been at the center of the challenging interagency and public/private economic work on both the War Production Board and the Army-Navy Munitions Board, and the later National Security Resources Board.

Eberstadt became the most important single proponent of the creation of a National Security Council for the United States. Then he became the single most influential advocate of the eventual National Security Act that created it. His reasons for supporting a National Security Council are practically forgotten today, but could not be more relevant.³⁷

The United States and its allies are already very far along in creating a divided economic world to isolate Russia, Iran, and North Korea. They are not altogether isolated, of course. They just function increasingly in a separate world of trade and finance, with China as a hub. That separating world can include much of the so-called “global South.”

Amid the enormous public discussion about Taiwan scenarios, hardly anyone analyzes the economics in depth. A recent illustration in late 2022 just took on the Taiwan blockade scenario, with no analysis of secondary consequences of any military action or second-order moves. Just that very conservative scenario featured trillions of dollars in losses across the world, huge problems in downstream supplies of semiconductors, the collapse of trade finance, and likely national efforts to control currency outflows.³⁸

A key point: In my indirect control scenario, the burden of challenging offshore Chinese border controls, and therefore of causing any cut off of Taiwanese exports like semiconductors, would actually fall on the United States and its allies, not on China. This may deter the *United States*.

Americans usually think that “deterrence” is all about how to deter bad countries from attacking them or their friends. To America’s adversaries, this paradigm is reversed. They think they are deterring America from attacking them.

When World War II began, and in the early Cold War, the world economy was already deeply fragmented and organized imperially. Those experiences are not sufficiently suggestive about the scope of a breakage now. A little more suggestive was the experience when war broke out in 1914. On July 31, 1914, the New York and London stock markets closed. They did not reopen for the next five months.

Even a relatively limited war with China would almost automatically, practically overnight, lead to freezes or seizures of trillions of dollars’ worth of Chinese and American assets of all kinds, with all sorts of counterparties caught in the whirlpools. It could rapidly trigger the greatest disruption in the global economy since the Great Depression, and the effects could easily exceed that.

From America’s adversaries’ point of view, the economic nightmares may not be so frightful. They may think they are readier for such calamities than the United States is.

Since some of the contingencies are out of American control, the president and his chief advisers at least need to map out these risks and visibly prepare to manage them. The United States should visibly plan whether and how it and its allies might weather the extreme economic contingencies that would necessarily accompany the outbreak of even a limited war.

These contingencies will include the abrupt disruption, freezing, or confiscation of Chinese and American, and allied, financial assets in the jurisdiction of the other side. It could produce the abrupt disruption of trade and supply chains of many kinds. The United States and its allies could also contemplate the affirmative moves and reassurances that might ease the shocks and reassure other countries around the world.³⁹

Such visible preparations will acquire a momentum of their own. If these plans become viable, they may even become plausible substitutes for the most vulnerable military moves.

36 Few stories of potentially war-losing failure and war-winning ingenuity are more striking than that of the U.S. rubber industry, which was rescued from a very misguided start by desperate salvage work in 1942 and 1943. Alexander Field, *The Economic Consequences of U.S. Mobilization for the Second World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022), chapter 3.

37 See Douglas Stuart, *Creating the National Security State: A History of the Law that Transformed America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

38 The recent example is the brief note by Charlie Vest, Agatha Kratz, and Reva Goujon, *The Global Economic Disruptions from a Taiwan Conflict*, from the Rhodium Group in December 2022..

39 Hugo Bromley and Eyck Freymann have drafted an illustrative study of such plans, to be published later in 2024 by the Hoover Institution Press.

The Big Picture

If the United States and its partners in Europe and Asia can weather the current international and domestic political crises, they will be better positioned to thrive during the rest of the 2020s than their principal adversaries. They are well positioned to influence the shape of the great technological revolutions of this age, help guide the future of the global economy, build on America's new status as an energy superpower in managing the energy transition, and lead a deep re-conception and overhaul of the defenses that countries will build in the digital age.

So it is important to keep in mind that the broader fundamentals for the United States and the free world are promising. They are especially promising in comparison with the courses that America's adversaries are charting.

The main challenge to the United States and to its friends may be in the short-term. They are stretched thin. A handful of key officials are functioning at the very limits of their capacity. With few exceptions, civilian leaders in the United States and the free states of Europe and Asia that are still at peace do not want to try to scare their publics into a prewar mode. They are uneasy about how their publics might respond to such alarms. And right now, the free world countries are coping. Their various enemies have problems and worries too.

My argument echoes Roosevelt's warning to Grew in January 1941. "We cannot lay down hard-and-fast plans," he said. Yet leaders today might be forgiven if they feel enmeshed in seemingly "hard-and-fast" commitments around the world. As enemies maneuver, and America does its own private stress tests, the United States and its friends should sharpen their focus and their strategies around allied strengths and strongpoints. "As each new development occurs we must, in the light of the circumstances then existing, decide when and where we can most effectively marshal and make use of our resources."

The worst case would be to sacrifice fundamentally strong future prospects because of short-term miscalculations. Having navigated successfully through years of intense crisis, the Kennedy and early Johnson administrations had turned the corner in the Cold War by 1963–64. The momentum of Soviet and Chinese advance was ebbing. The free world was on the verge of historic advances and achievements in society and science.

Then America's leaders blew it. The great tragedy of Vietnam was that although the fears about North Vietnam turned out to have been well-judged, the

efficacy of a commitment to defend South Vietnam was not. The American overcommitment in Vietnam, at that moment of promise in world history, instead became a dreadful self-inflicted wound.⁴⁰

The task for this period of crisis is to weather it with America's core strengths and advantages preserved, or even enhanced. 📌

Philip Zelikow is the Botha-Chan Senior Fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution. For 25 years, he held a chaired professorship in history at the University of Virginia. For seven years before that, he was an associate professor at Harvard University. An attorney and former career diplomat, Zelikow's federal service includes work across the government in the five administrations from President Ronald Reagan through President Barack Obama. Zelikow has also directed three successful and bipartisan national commissions: the Carter-Ford Commission on Federal Election Reform, the 9/11 Commission, and the Covid Crisis Group.

Image: ChatGPT

40 One of the least-known aspects of Kissinger's relation to Vietnam were his remarkable and secret efforts, while a professor advising the government, making in-depth visits in the field during 1965 and 1966, to suggest politically practical ways for America to get out. Niall Ferguson brings this out in the first volume of his biography of Kissinger. Niall Ferguson, *Kissinger 1923-1968: The Idealist* (New York: Allen Lane, 2015).