

Alternative Futures Following a Great Power War

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ISSUE

The U.S. Department of Defense has been increasingly focused on the possibility of a great power war. To inform long-term thinking about such a war, we assess how the strategic environment could change after this type of rare but consequential war.



APPROACH

We generated four hypothetical great power war scenarios and examined their postwar consequences. Because the victor of a great power war is thought to have outsized influence on the postwar environment, we designed scenarios with different winners. To generate plausible narratives that could lead to such outcomes and assess other consequences of such a war, we drew from the literature on contemporary decisionmaking in key states; the international relations literature on foreign policy decisionmaking, interstate war, and alliances; and analogies from historical great power wars. We also examined the history of predictions prior to past great power wars to identify common errors and to offer planners, decisionmakers, and analysts guidance on whether any existing assumptions might merit additional consideration. This report considers the four hypothetical great power war scenarios listed in the table. This report was finalized in January 2021, before the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. It has not been subsequently updated.



CONCLUSIONS

Although our hypothetical scenarios cannot be used to predict the most-likely postwar outcomes, they do highlight the following plausible outcomes that U.S. decisionmakers and planners should consider:

- Wartime victory might not produce a favorable postwar setting. For example, victors will be weakened relative to noncombatant states and could face stronger balancing coalitions.
- A U.S. victory could provoke deeper Sino-Russian military and economic cooperation—or even a mutual defense pact.
- A great power war, even one with Russia, could sharpen the U.S. focus on the Indo-Pacific. Postwar resource constraints would create incentives to prioritize China as the most significant potential threat to the United States.

- Although wars can strengthen bonds between allies, postwar alliance cohesion could suffer from wartime disagreements and how allies respond to the changed strategic environment.
- Allied contributions to a U.S.-led war with Russia or China might vary across and even within scenarios, suggesting the importance of plans that are robust to changes in access.
- U.S. allies and partners might face new incentives to proliferate after a great power war that degrades U.S. power.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Assess the potential postwar consequences of a war that goes according to planners' assumptions (as well as those that do not) to evaluate whether existing war plans are likely to support long-term U.S. interests.
- Consider setting a futures game in a period following a great power war to assess whether proposed capabilities would be appropriate in an unfamiliar strategic context.

HYPOTHETICAL GREAT POWER WAR SCENARIOS EXAMINED IN THIS REPORT

Scenario	Victor	Role of Nuclear Weapons	Length	Strategic Outcomes
China annexes Taiwan	China	Conflict ends with China's demonstration of an NSNW	8 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China solidifies control of Taiwan. • A U.S.-led multilateral counterbalancing alliance forms. • Japan, South Korea pursue nuclear weapons.
The United States degrades China's military power after an East China Sea conflict expands	United States and Japan	Possibility of nuclear escalation affects combatants' targeting	6 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China commits to military rebuilding program. • Russia and China formalize a military alliance. • U.S. allies and partners continue to hedge.
A Taiwan conflict ends indecisively	Indecisive	Possibility of nuclear escalation affects combatants' targeting	4 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The possibility of renewed conflict drives a regional arms race. • U.S. troops remain on Taiwan. • The PRC restarts conflict to take Taiwan four years later.
War caused by Russian misperception ends in restrictions on military forces in northeastern Europe	Indecisive	Russian losses lead to use of NSNWs and to U.S. use of NSNWs in response	3 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A NATO-Russia agreement limits foreign forces in Baltic States, Poland, Belarus, and Kaliningrad. • Germany revokes U.S. basing access, forcing a posture realignment. • Poland initiates nuclear program and shifts toward authoritarianism.

NOTES: NATO = North Atlantic Treaty Organization; NSNW = nonstrategic nuclear weapon; PRC = People's Republic of China.



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