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## **Weakened or Responsible Russia?**

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In the spring of 2022, leaders from the highest reaches of the United States' national security community began to propose the idea of a "weakened Russia" as being one of the desired outcomes for its invasion of neighboring Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> The objective of having a military that could no longer undertake future invasions was relevant to both appease international outrage against Russia's actions and reinforce the norms of the international order. However, leaders have not articulated what a weakened Russia means as a goal or, more importantly, what it might mean for the future. The objective of a weakened Russia, therefore, falls short of acknowledging the reality of Russia's geopolitical position and its importance as an actor in the international system.

Policymakers must use imagination to anticipate the impacts a desired outcome will have on both the parties to a conflict and the world. The 9/11 commission famously concluded that the United States' intelligence community suffered from a lack of imagination when it came to envisioning the threat Al Qaeda posed to the United States' homeland. The US, and community of nations aligned against Russia, place themselves at risk if they fail to imagine what a weakened Russia would mean for Europe, the Eurasian continent, and the world as a whole. The United States, along with its allies and partners, should not pursue a weakened Russia, but instead a responsible and acceptable Russia regarding its behavior in the international arena. There are several reasons to consider why this is a prudent path to take. First, Russia was already in a position of relative weakness prior to its invasion of Ukraine. Second, weakening Russia does not address the security concerns it had about itself and its neighbors prior to invading

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<sup>1</sup>Missy Ryan and Annabelle Timsit, "U.S. wants Russian military 'weakened' from Ukraine invasion, Austin says," *Washington Post*, April 25, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/25/russia-weakened-lloyd-austin-ukraine-visit/>; NBC, "Jake Sullivan: 'Weapons are arriving every day' in Ukraine," video, 4:30, April 10, 2022, <https://www.nbc.com/meet-the-press/video/full-jake-sullivan-weapons-are-arriving-every-day-in-ukraine/420357951>.

Ukraine. Finally, if the international community does weaken Russia for invading Ukraine, this does not change the fact that Russia will still have an influential geopolitical position after the conflict ends.

### **Isn't Russia Already Weak?**

Russia's apparent failures in Ukraine demonstrate a weakness which already exists in their military capabilities. The failure of the initial invasion in February 2022, along with failed and stalled offensives near Kharkiv, Kherson, and Bakhmut, illuminate some harsh realities for the Kremlin about the state of its military. In fifteen months of fighting, the Russian armed forces have been unable to overcome an opponent one quarter the size of its active military in terms of manpower and vehicles.<sup>2</sup> Considering annual expenditures, prior to Russia's invasion, its 2021 military budget of \$65.9 billion was the fifth highest in the world and dwarfed Ukraine's military expenditures by over ten times.<sup>3</sup> Russia's budget once was a point of strength against Ukraine, but international donations of more than \$60 billion in military aid alone to Ukraine have eroded that advantage in the last year.<sup>4</sup> A callup of 300,000 conscripts to replenish the Russian armed forces' ranks, combined with reliance on Wagner mercenary forces to shore up the most active fighting fronts in Ukraine, implies Russia has reached a level of combat "weakness" already. Despite seemingly obvious advantages, especially at the outset of operations, Russia has achieved less than desired outcomes in Ukraine thus far.

Considered against its primary European adversary, NATO, Russia is already in a position of relative weakness. Even with the fifth highest military spending in the world, Russia

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<sup>2</sup> Statista, "Comparison of the military capabilities of Russia and Ukraine as of 2023," Chart, *Statista*, February 7, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1296573/russia-ukraine-military-comparison/>.

<sup>3</sup> "SIPRI Military Expenditures Database," SIPRI, April 3, 2023, <https://milex.sipri.org/sipri>.

<sup>4</sup> Kiel Institut für Weltwirtschaft, "Total bilateral aid commitments to Ukraine between January 24, 2022 and February 24, 2023, by type and country or organization (in billion euros)," Chart, *Statista*, April 14, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1303432/total-bilateral-aid-to-ukraine/>.

has been unable to purchase success in its Ukraine operation. Assessments which show NATO defense spending at 17 times greater than that of Russia are another indicator of relative weakness.<sup>5</sup> Some analysts already predict that it will take Russia anywhere from 5 to 10 years to rebuild what they have lost in materiel alone.<sup>6</sup> The loss of personnel exacerbates these losses in materiel and equipment. The toll on personnel remains truthfully undetermined, potentially in the hundreds of thousands, and the harm to leadership experience could take a nearly a generation to reconstitute. Looking big on paper and looking capable in military operations are clearly different, and Russia's unsuccessful expedition into Ukraine appears to confirm this. Russia is showing its weaknesses independent of measures the US and international community may take to cause further weakening.

Russia is already a declining nation in its demographics and economy. According to some estimates, the Russian population of 146 million people could dip below 70 million unless Russia can attract 1 million immigrants a year for the next 80 years.<sup>7</sup> While the Russian economy has not contracted as much as initially hoped due to punitive sanctions, it is possible that the nation will facing a decade or more of negative economic progress.<sup>8</sup> Declining oil revenues and consumption of currency reserves contribute to showing the weakness of the Russian economy.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Anthony Cordesman and Paul Cormarie, "NATO Force Planning and the Impact of the Ukraine War," CSIS, last modified October 24, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/nato-force-planning-and-impact-ukraine-war>.

<sup>6</sup> Aaron Mehta, "Russia's military is now a 'wounded bear.' Can it revive itself?," *Breaking Defense*, last modified May 20, 2022, <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/05/russias-military-is-now-a-wounded-bear-can-it-revive-itself/>.

<sup>7</sup> "Unprecedented Migration May Be Only Chance to Beat Russia's Population Decline," *Moscow Times*, April 13, 2023, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/04/13/unprecedented-migration-may-be-only-chance-to-beat-russias-population-decline-study-a80813>.

<sup>8</sup> Alexandra Prokopenko, "The Cost of War: Russian Economy Faces a Decade of Regress" *Carnegie Endowment*, last modified December 19, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88664>.

<sup>9</sup> Diane Francis, "Russia faces long economic decline as isolated Putin turns to China," *UkraineAlert* (blog), March 30, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russia-faces-long-economic-decline-as-isolated-putin-turns-to-china/>.

Weakening Russia as a strategy just doubles down on a demographic and economic reality already in motion.

How much weaker does the US and the nations supporting Ukraine want Russia to be? The risk becomes reprising the 1990s era collapse of post-Soviet Russia, but with an increased potential economic and humanitarian crisis. If internal collapse occurred, neighboring countries might face the undesirable reality of Russian citizens fleeing a failed state. A weakened Russia exists, and the trend lines do not indicate imminent improvement.

### **Weakening Supports Russian Narratives and Exacerbates Security Concerns**

Weakening Russia reinforces its leaders' sense of insecurity and validates the narratives of a world they perceive to be against them. Putin is famous for describing the downfall of the USSR as the geopolitical tragedy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> His expressed feelings about this event reveal the motive behind his pursuit of a resurgent Russian identity and specifically his role as the champion for this effort. This identity that Putin has attempted to construct of himself may hold explanatory power for his actions, preferences, and interests.<sup>11</sup> Political scholar Kathryn Stoner and former US ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul argued in 2015, Putin maintains his legitimacy and position at home through a narrative of perpetual conflict. This casts him as alleviating a global siege against Russia by "battling neo-Nazis in Ukraine, the evil Americans, and the decadent West."<sup>12</sup> Weakening Russia, as an internationally imposed consequence for its invasion of Ukraine, reinforces the perceived legitimacy of Putin's narrative and moves Russia farther away the international rules-based system.

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<sup>10</sup> Claire Bigg, "World: Was Soviet Collapse Last Century's Worst Geopolitical Catastrophe?," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, April 29, 2005, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1058688.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Agius, Christine, "Social Constructivism," in *Contemporary Security Studies, 5th ed.*, ed. Alan Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 77.

<sup>12</sup> Kathryn Stoner and Michael McFaul, "Who Lost Russia (This Time)? Vladimir Putin," *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (2015): 181.

The goal to weaken Russia will reinforce security concerns which Russia's leaders inherently have, making them less likely to change course. In the wake of the Cold War, some predicted that an expanding NATO would drive Russia into the arms of nationalist leaders who would spend to rebuild the military and attempt to reclaim their former buffer states.<sup>13</sup> This seems to have come true as Putin and his supporters in the Kremlin lashed out against weaker countries in their immediate sphere, such as Georgia and Ukraine over the last 15 years, justifying these actions as necessary for "national security." As Robert Kaplan wrote of Russia's geographical position, "unto this day, [it] is an insecure and sprawling land power, the victim of invasions...with only time, distance and weather as its friends".<sup>14</sup> Russia's leaders find themselves surrounded by a resolute NATO on their western flank, a rising China on their southern flank and a re-arming Japan on their eastern flank. Finland's recent accession into NATO, along with Sweden's pending membership, does nothing to alleviate these anxieties. With this reality in mind, a weakened Russia will exacerbate its perceptions of insecurity at home and play to Putin's identity narrative within Russia.

A weakened Russia, in exchange for support to Ukrainian victory, only addresses the security interests of one side of this conflict. Balkan, Baltic, and Scandinavian states could all reap some benefit from a weakened Russia on their borders in terms of a reduced threat of Russian military adventurism. What remains unanswered are the security concerns that Russia has on its borders. A weakened Russia would mean a state that cannot address security challenges in lands far from Moscow which have historically been claimed by other nations such

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<sup>13</sup> Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey M. Sapolsky, "Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation." *International Security* 2, no. 4 (Spring 1997): 32.

<sup>14</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, *The Revenge of Geography: What the Map Tells Us About Coming Conflicts and the Battle Against Fate* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2012), 45.

as Japan and China. The liberation narrative of ethnic Russians used to justify actions in Ukraine, is one that another revisionist power could turn against Russia.

Consider, for example, what a weakened Germany meant for security on the European continent in the aftermath of World War I. Weakening the surviving aggressor to the point that it felt insecure and economically fragile did not solve the problem to “end all wars” as early 20<sup>th</sup> century world leaders had hoped. The seeds sown at Versailles were the fruit reaped by Hitler and Nazi Germany in the Sudetenland, Poland and Alsace-Lorraine. Weakening a state may satisfy the need for inflicting punishment on an aggressor and may even alleviate the security concerns of some parties temporarily. However, weakening as a policy fails to consider the security concerns of all states, especially the state subjected to the weakening impacts of the conflict termination settlement. A weakened state may mean creation of seething embers of perceived oppression or wrongs of the negotiating table which the state will eventually seek to avenge. One can argue Hitler used this very fervor to drive Germany into World War II. With a global coalition aligned to weaken them, Russians could weather the deprivation for now and use it as an impetus for future aggressive action in their security sphere later.

There are some steps the international community could take regarding perceived security concerns as an alternative to pursuing a weakened Russia. While Russia has committed terrible crimes against the Ukrainian people, criminalizing its leaders is unlikely to encourage a pursuit of responsible action or negotiated peace.<sup>15</sup> Instead, Putin will attempt to capitalize on the narrative of the world turning against Russia. A potential solution would be the international community committing that Putin and his highest officials will not face prosecution for war

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<sup>15</sup> Jacqueline R. McAllister and Daniel Krmaric, “The International Criminal Court Takes Aim at Vladimir Putin,” *Political Violence at a Glance*, April 5, 2023, <https://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2023/04/05/the-international-criminal-court-takes-aim-at-vladimir-putin/>.

crimes, but they will have to effectively stay under “house arrest” in Russia for the rest of their lives. Addressing the security concerns of Russia could also mean placing a limit on NATO expansion in exchange for a Russian commitment to keep its military within its borders. Now that Russia has seen the international response of military aid and economic sanctions for an unprovoked attack, it should understand it will not be able to get away unscathed for invading its neighbors.

### **Russia Still Matters**

A weakened Russia is not the best policy because doing so cannot erase the reality that Russia remains part of today’s international system with strategic capabilities. Russia still possesses the largest nuclear stockpile in the entire world.<sup>16</sup> A weakened nuclear-armed Russia is a risky reality for the world and could only grow more problematic. Given Russia’s underperformance in ground combat, the truth about the real stability of their nuclear program is worth questioning and not worth making any worse. Russia has already indicated its intent for withdrawal from New START protocols which would reduce communication and clarity about intentions between Russia and the US when it comes to strategic weapons.<sup>17</sup> The risk of nuclear miscalculation, especially if a weakened Russia turns into a destabilized Russia, could become a disaster with global implications. Therefore, especially given its position as a nuclear power, the call to weaken Russia may encompass unintended risks.

With a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), Russia has an international political tool held by only four other nations. The veto vote in the UNSC gives Russia a degree of international political power with few equals. While some may debate the

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<sup>16</sup> “Status of World Nuclear Forces,” Federation of American Scientists, March 28, 2023, <https://fas.org/issues/nuclear-weapons/status-world-nuclear-forces/>

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Gabuev, “Is Russia Shooting Itself in the Foot by Suspending the New START Treaty?,” Carnegie Endowment, last modified February 24, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/89131>.

relative effectiveness of the United Nations in recent decades, the reality is that Russia fully retains its ability to impede UN action on security matters with its veto vote. Russia already holds other conflicts in the world, such as the ones between Kosovo and Serbia or the Syrian civil war, in a state of indeterminate action through its UNSC veto.<sup>18</sup> Unless Russia loses permanent status on the UNSC, which is unlikely to occur, then weakening Russia as a punishment for invading Ukraine will not influence this form of international political power.

Russia remains an influential factor in petroleum energy production. In 2023, Russia was second only to the US in daily crude oil and natural gas production.<sup>19</sup> Europe has tried to wean itself from Russian energy in the wake of the Ukraine invasion at high cost to its citizens. However, as recent energy deals by China and India indicate, a market still exists for Russian energy in the world.<sup>20</sup> Leaders looking to stretch their nations' money cannot ignore the draw of cheap Russian energy as they attempt to address their own challenges at home. There may be a desire to weaken Russia, but the reality of its energy outputs and the finances they provide the Kremlin are impossible to ignore.

Finally, Russia is a known malicious cyber actor that can and will use its capabilities to disrupt everything from democratic elections to energy flows in other countries. Russia has a proven cyber and information capability that it is willing to deploy to support its political aims.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Yasmine Nahlawi, Overcoming Russian and Chinese Vetoes on Syria through Uniting for Peace, *Journal of Conflict and Security Law* 24, no 1 (Spring 2019): 122, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcsl/kry032>.

<sup>19</sup> "Oil Production by Country 2023," World Population Review, February 1, 2022, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/oil-production-by-country>; "Natural Gas by Country 2023," World Population Review, February 1, 2022, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/natural-gas-by-country>.

<sup>20</sup> Shweta Sharma, "Russian oil exports back above pre-Ukraine war levels as India and China buy 90% of Moscow's crude," *Independent*, April 14, 2023, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-ukraine-oil-export-india-china-b2319123.html>

<sup>21</sup> Congressional Research Service, "Russian Cyber Units," IF11718 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2022), 1, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11718>.

This is one asymmetric tool that is low-cost and high impact with little connection to the materiel or personnel readiness of military forces. Russia can pose a threat in cyberspace outside of how its military is performing on the ground in Ukraine. Thus, a weakened Russia is unlikely to impose a cost on its cyber capabilities.

Russia still retains key tools to hold the world at risk both in terms of real and political threat. A potential measure to encourage responsible actions by Russia is to resume and reinforce strategic nuclear dialogue. While the world may disagree with the situation in Ukraine, the idea of avoiding nuclear war has greater potential appeal and represents a channel of communication that could facilitate other conflict-related discussion. The US, its allies and partners must continue to engage Russia through diplomatic channels at the UN and through other avenues of dialogue. Weakening Russia could contribute to further ostracizing. Given Russia's influential position international institutions, energy markets, nuclear weapons, space, and cyberspace the international community cannot ignore the potential impacts weakening could have in these areas.

### **Let's Go For It!...**

There are some factors to consider which make weakening Russia the preferred policy given the current realities of Russia's leadership. Putin sees it as his destiny to undo the geopolitical failings of the USSR's collapse and solidify his place among the pantheon of Russian leaders. Given such a narcissistic pursuit, the United States and its allies may have no practical alternative than to pile on with weakening Russia. Without removal of Putin himself this ideological fantasy will perpetuate. High approval ratings from within Russia seem to indicate that Putin is not departing his position anytime soon.<sup>22</sup> It is also doubtful that a successor

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<sup>22</sup> Levada Center, "Do you approve of the activities of Vladimir Putin as the president (prime minister) of Russia?," Chart, *Statista*, April 26, 2023. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/896181/putin-approval-rating-russia/>.

would be more moderate. Thus, to relate to an autocrat like Putin in any other terms than punitive consequences is just accommodating him. Therefore, the best thing to do, for now, is to inflict a maximum amount of punishment on him and his regime so they have as little military power possible in the end.

Also, the policy of a weakened Russia allows the international community to send a message to other adventurous powers of the potential consequences from seizing their neighbors' territory. Weakening Russia as punishment for its bad behavior against a neighboring state holds some logical value. NATO resolve and international outrage have only grown since Russia's invasion, demonstrating that violently breaching international sovereignty laws will not receive a pass no matter how contrived historic unity narratives might be. Russia thinks in terms of hard diplomacy, so unless the United States and its allies commit to a harsh punishment, Russia will not change.<sup>23</sup> Some analysts assess (or hope) that what Russia has experienced because of their actions in Ukraine will serve as an object lesson for the Communist Party of China (CPC) as they seek to re-make the issues of Taiwan and the South China Sea to fit a history of their liking.<sup>24</sup> The resultant logic is that weakening an aggressor is the way the US, its allies and partners will make nations pay for violating the international rules-based order.

### **...But Weakening Won't Solve the Problem**

The seemingly open-ended military support to the Ukrainians, in pursuit of a weakened Russia, challenges the idea that Russia can or should have any security concerns of its own. Renowned political realist John Mearsheimer argued, "states always act according to their own

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<sup>23</sup> Joshua Huminski, "Hard power and conventional deterrence still matter, just ask Putin" *Breaking Defense*, last modified January 25, 2022, <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/01/hard-power-and-conventional-deterrence-still-matter-just-ask-putin/>.

<sup>24</sup> Sheena Chestnut Greitens "China's Response to War in Ukraine" *Asian Survey* 62, no. 5-6 (September-December 2022): 765, <https://online.ucpress.edu/as/article/62/5-6/751/194331/China-s-Response-to-War-in-Ukraine>.

self-interest and do not subordinate their interests to the interests of other states, or to the interests of the so-called international community.”<sup>25</sup> By this definition Putin is acting in realistic terms. This means the international community’s pursuit of a weakened Russia through sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and military materiel support to Ukraine is an unrealistic answer to the problem. Unprovoked attack on another nation in violation of international agreements is unequivocally wrong. However, while weakening Russia, as punishment for its aggression on a neighboring state, is potentially desirable in one sense, it does not account for insecurities Russia perceives. A Russia weakened to the point of desperation or collapse provides a potentially more dangerous outcome for the international community. Seeing no other options, Russia could choose to employ its strategic capabilities with devastating impact to the international order.

Additionally, the hope that weakening as punishment for illegal behavior will send an effective message to a nation like China breaks down at several levels. First, China and Russia do not share a common economic starting point. Russia’s economy is already declining while China’s is growing and has a robust manufacturing base to compete with Western nations. China is not dependent on revenues for raw goods to sustain its economy in the same way as Russia is in the wider international community.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, to take punitive action against China through material support to an invaded nation, like Taiwan, allies would have to transit great distances to reach an island that is already under a significant anti-access defense umbrella. Unlike the rail lines that run from Europe through Poland into Ukraine to supply aid, there is no corollary for Taiwan’s sustainment if under attack. Thus, the object lesson of Russia’s

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<sup>25</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, (New York: Norton, 2001), 33.

<sup>26</sup> DW News, “The true impact of a year of war on Russia's economy,” video, 26:40, February 23, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QU0resswOds>.

weakening for attacking Ukraine does not provide parallels to deter potential Chinese action in a situation like attacking Taiwan.

### **Benefits of a Responsible Russia**

Rather than continuing to pursue a weakened Russia, the United States and its allies would be better off pursuing a Russia that is responsible or, at worst, acceptable. Writing in 1991, Paul Nitze argued, when it came to the world order in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse, the "central theme of U.S. policy should be the accommodation and protection of diversity within a general framework of required order."<sup>27</sup> Putin has cemented himself in the seat of power in Moscow for the foreseeable future, therefore, the international community will need to find a way accept the "diversity" of the Russian form of government within a framework of "required order." The international community will have to acknowledge Russia's perceived security concerns and accept its non-democratic form of government. At the same time, Russia must increase responsibility in such matters as neighbors' sovereignty, nuclear arms, and weaponization of cyber.

There are multiple benefits available to the United States if it chooses to pursue the goal of a responsible Russia rather than a weakened Russia. A responsible Russia in the European security sphere would place the United States in a position to finally "pivot to the Pacific" and focus on China as a peer competitor rather than expending effort on a weak and declining state such as Russia. Additionally, the United States could avoid what former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger described in a 2022 interview as the unwise act of "tak[ing] an adversarial position to two adversaries in a way that drives them together."<sup>28</sup> Putin and Xi's March 2023 summit may,

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<sup>27</sup> Paul H. Nitze, "World Order from Hiroshima to Kuwait," *Naval War College Review* 44, no. 4, (Autumn 1991): 9, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44638557>.

<sup>28</sup> James Politi, "We are now living in a totally new era – Henry Kissinger" *Financial Times*, May 9, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/cd88912d-506a-41d4-b38f-0c37cb7f0e2f>.

however, indicate the US is lagging in achieving this. For decades the United States has been able to benefit from tension between Russia and China. If the United States is looking to counter China as a competitor, it would benefit from a bordering power like Russia to keep the Chinese government encircled with security dilemmas. Finally, the emergence of a responsible Russia could have the benefit of China seeing the win-win use of its power in responsible ways as preferable to alienation from the international community because of hostile actions against neighbors. Ultimately, the goal of a weakened Russia plays well in an operational and short-term setting, but such a condition does not fully imagine the potential long term global or US national security impacts.

### *Implications of Nuclear Weapons on Strategic Competition*

**Thesis.** Nuclear weapons change the nature of strategic competition in two key ways. First, by making direct conflict between two nuclear-armed powers much less likely, and second by making low-level activities “below the threshold of conflict” more likely. Of these two factors, the first is the more significant; it represents a fundamental change in the nature of strategic competition compared to the millennia preceding it. The consequence of this thesis is that conflicts within strategic competitions are more likely to play out in economic and diplomatic realms or in peripheral theaters using proxy states or forces than before the nuclear age. Thus, Grand Strategy is elevated in importance in the atomic age.

**Reduction in Likelihood of Major State-on-State Conflict.** Nuclear weapons make wars between atomic powers with unlimited or near-unlimited aims unwinnable, as nuclear weapons impose unacceptable costs even to the putative victor. Even wars with limited aims and limited objectives between two nuclear-armed states still carry the significant risk of undesired nuclear escalation. Because of these two factors, conflict between nuclear-armed strategic competitors is less likely than between two non-nuclear strategic competitors. The first argument that supports this thesis is empirical. Great Power competitions before the age of nuclear weapons nearly always resulted in multiple direct conflicts between the competitors, often at significant cost to both powers. The Peloponnesian War(s), The Punic wars, the Franco-British wars from 1716-1815, and the British-German competitions from late the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the end of WW2 all resulted in state-on-states conflict between the principles, at vast costs of blood and treasure to both sides.

Moreover, the Hapsburgs, Ottomans, Russians, Swedes, and Prussians all fought each other on multiple occasions in the ~400 years before Hiroshima. The so-called “Thucydides

trap” drew many, if not most, strategic competitors into direct conflict with one another as the underlying power dynamics between the various powers shifted. Yet since the Americans dropped two atomic bombs on Japan, no nuclear weapons have been used in anger, and no nuclear-armed strategic competitors have gone to war with each other. While the PRC and the Soviet Union fought an undeclared but significant border skirmish in 1969, and India and Pakistan have engaged in multiple minor skirmishes at contested border points, none has declared war on or committed substantial portions of their armed forces against the other.

The second argument supporting the thesis addresses the “why” raised by the above empirical examples of great-power competition pre and post-splitting of the atom. *Why* have nuclear-armed states not engaged in direct conflict with each other up to this point, and *why* are they unlikely to do so in the future? The answer is mutually assured destruction (MAD) and the risk of nuclear escalation. Nuclear weapons make Clausewitz’s theoretical “Absolute war” possible,<sup>1</sup> giving a state the power to annihilate an adversary. As Admiral Radford put it, “a war of annihilation might possibly bring a pyrrhic military victory, but it would be politically and economically senseless.”<sup>2</sup> Clausewitz’s basic theory of the purpose of war, to pursue a political objective, is rendered impossible because no objective that includes the “victor’s” functional survival is obtainable. Moreover, the conquered territory would be radioactive ash, reducing the value of the object to near zero. Finally, the potential global environmental implications of even a one-sided nuclear exchange could be calamitous for victorious, defeated, and neutral countries alike. Following Clausewitz’s precepts to “establish the kind of war upon which you are

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<sup>1</sup> Clausewitz, Carl von. *On War*. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, at 78.

<sup>2</sup> Weigley, Russell. *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*. New York: Macmillan, 1973, at 378.

embarking”<sup>3</sup> and to conduct an assessment has and will lead rational actors to vehemently avoid any war in which that actor assesses thermonuclear weapons employed upon their nation as a likely outcome.

The above reality undergirds Type 1 nuclear deterrence,<sup>4</sup> or basic deterrence. The concept means that using nuclear weapons on any state with a robust second-strike capability will likely bring about functional MAD. Even in ‘victory,’ the defeated nation could impose similar destruction upon the victor; minimal second-strike capability could result in tens of millions of deaths, trillions of dollars in economic harm, and irreparable environmental damage. This dynamic would shift if a nation believed it could execute a successful first strike and preclude a retaliatory strike. Thomas Schelling noted that the risk of conflict could increase if one party thought they could gain a significant enough advantage in “shooting first” to successfully execute a successful first strike and/or counterforce attack on the other’s nuclear arsenal.<sup>5</sup> However, throughout nearly all of the atomic age, and for the foreseeable future between great powers, the “missiles will always get through.” Nuclear states deliberately build redundant and resilient second-strike capabilities, particularly nuclear SLBMs and mobile launchers, to deter first strikes.<sup>6</sup> “Shooting the arrows” at the scale and speed with which strategic competitors could launch them is not feasible and will not be for the foreseeable future. Accordingly, fear of retaliation means that nuclear states have overwhelming interests in avoiding a nuclear exchange. Therefore, they will maintain strong incentive not to enter into a conflict in which a nuclear exchange is possible.

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<sup>3</sup> Clausewitz, Carl von, at 190.

<sup>4</sup> Kadercan, Burak. “Nuclear Proliferation and Arms Races” (U.S. Naval War College Lecture, Newport, RI, 3 Feb 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Krepinevich, Andrew F. “The New Nuclear Age: How China’s Growing Nuclear Arsenal Threatens Deterrence.” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 101, no. 3 (May-June 2022). Pages 92-98, 100

<sup>6</sup> Wohlstetter, Albert. “The Delicate Balance of Terror.” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 37, no. 2 (January 1959), at 231.

There is a counterargument to the empirical and logical arguments presented above. First, as to the empirical basis, one could offer that strategic competition has existed between states for at least 2500 years, while nuclear weapons have only existed for ~80 years. Moreover, only a handful of states possess weapons, most of whom are formally or informally allied with the United States. This, therefore, represents a relatively small sample size from which to draw sweeping conclusions. Moreover, U.S. and Soviet Union (1948, 1962, 1973), the Soviet Union and PRC (1960s-1970s), and India and Pakistan (1999) all *nearly* engaged in direct conflict at various points in the nuclear age. The Soviets even contemplated a first strike against the nascent Chinese nuclear program to the point of socializing it with the United States. According to this argument, contemporary states may have gotten lucky over the past 73 years. And simply because two nuclear states have not yet gone to war does not logically dictate it cannot or will not happen.

The rebuttal to this is that while it may be that the world is fortunate that miscalculation in the nuclear age hadn't led to nuclear war, the above examples did not result in all-out war *because* atomic weapons were potentially involved. Modern strategic competitors have rigorously avoided crossing perceived red lines and actively sought de-escalation in the face of all-out war. Both Soviet and American retraining pressure on the Arabs and Israelis, respectively, in the 1973 Yom Kippur War is an illustration of this playing out.

A second counterargument to the thesis that nuclear weapons make direct conflict between strategic competitors less likely is that while nuclear-armed states may not undertake unlimited wars or attempt first strikes against fellow nuclear-armed competitors, that does not necessarily preclude attempting *limited* wars against strategic competitors or against putative allies of the competitor, with the expectation that the conflict would be contained. The latter is

essentially the challenge of Type 2 or 'extended' deterrence. Part of this argument is the emergence of the "nuclear taboo,"<sup>7</sup> whereby international norms are so set against nuclear weapons that any future first-user would be made a near-pariah state. A would-be aggressor might contemplate successfully employing conventional force against a nuclear-armed strategic rival in a war of limited aims that wouldn't put the opponent on death ground. The nuclear taboo and the adversary's fear of escalation might be expected to buy down the risk of unintentionally climbing the escalation ladder. Moreover, internal domestic pressures could increase the risk appetite for an insecure regime seeking to wag the proverbial dog and increase the temptation to engage in a limited war with a nuclear rival. An obvious example would be an attempted Chinese invasion of Taiwan, including attacking American forces postured to defend the island.

The challenge of extended deterrence is why the balance of conventional force strength still matters and explains why South China Sea military assessments focus on numbers and quality ships, planes, and conventional missiles rather than nuclear payloads or urban deaths from fallout. The failure of Eisenhower's New Look and "Massive Retaliation" programs illustrates the inability of threatened nuclear retaliation alone to deter any/all types of aggression. While a nuclear-armed state could deter a strategic competitor from an all-out nuclear attack by holding its cities at risk, responding to minor incursions in distant theaters with a similar nuclear response was both morally bankrupt and nearly impossible to credibly threaten; the perceived value of the object was well short of the perceived risks involved. As NSC 68 predicted and advocated for a significant and flexible conventional deterrent was also needed. The implication of the above is that a state might be willing to risk war with a nuclear competitor on the belief

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<sup>7</sup> Kadercan, Burak. "Nuclear Proliferation and Arms Races" (U.S. Naval War College Lecture, Newport, RI, 3 Feb 2023).

that the conflict could be localized and fought for limited aims with limited means and that neither side would breach the nuclear taboo.

The rebuttal to this counterargument is that the risk of nuclear escalation still places a significant restraining hand on decision-makers as they balance risk and reward. It is undoubtedly true that nuclear weapons cannot preclude nuclear competitors from engaging in conflict. Additionally, the shadow cast by their respective conventional forces will still play enormous roles in crafting and deciding policy. Nevertheless, states will still temper any policies or decisions, knowing that open conflict with a nuclear-armed state could result in nuclear war.

This awareness is due to the well-recognized risk of unanticipated escalation in time and intensity of open conflicts between two strong competitors. Once clashes between major strategic competitors started, they historically proved difficult to contain. Often, they escalated well beyond what either combatant initially assessed or desired, particularly in both World Wars. Additionally, with this escalation, perceived regime survival, concern about sunk costs, and the 'primordial passions' of the people come into play, significantly increasing the stakes and risk appetite of one or both competitors while limiting off-ramps. Wargaming at the Naval War College between two nuclear powers usually results in a quick rise up the escalation ladder to employing nuclear weapons.<sup>8</sup> States and leaders know this dynamic and the difficulty in controlling the escalation ladder well. States are also deliberately vague in articulating their red lines for using nuclear weapons to deter opponents from approaching them.<sup>9</sup> Decision makers are accordingly strongly deterred from undertaking actions that they perceive could lead to direct conflict with a nuclear power, *even if they believe the ensuing conflict might be contained.*

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Biddle, Tami Davis. "Coercion Theory: A Basic Introduction for Practitioners." *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2020), at 103.

Thus, in the discussions of decision for war, the presence of established nuclear weapons programs will always exercise a significant, if not dispositive, restraining influence on strategic competitors from deliberately engaging one another. As a result, nuclear weapons significantly raise the risk threshold for nuclear-armed states contemplating war with a competitor, even limited wars, and thus make such conflicts less likely to occur. This dynamic implies that economic strength and alliance structure are more important than sheer numbers of nuclear weapons over the long term. While major pre-nuclear strategic competitions were rarely settled by decisive military victory, the competitors nevertheless repeatedly employed time, effort, and resources to attempt it (e.g., Sparta, Napoleon, Moltke the Younger, etc.). In the nuclear era, conventional force is about posturing and deterring in peripheral theaters, not winning strategic conflicts outright.

### **Nuclear Weapons Increase the Likelihood of Low-Level Conflict Between Strategic Competitors:**

The second way the nature of strategic competition has changed is the stability/instability paradox, whereby “stability at the central, strategic level allows for instability at lower levels of conflict.”<sup>10</sup> Under this paradigm, fear of nuclear retaliation means that nuclear states are *more* likely to engage in low-level, proxy, or unattributable acts (e.g., cyber) within strategic competition under the perceived safety of the nuclear umbrella. This phenomenon was predicted by Liddel Hart in 1954 when he said, “to the extent that the [Hydrogen] bomb reduces the likelihood of full-scale war, it increases the possibility of limited war pursued by widespread

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<sup>10</sup> Hoyt, Timothy D. “Kargil: The Nuclear Dimension,” in *Asymmetric Warfare in South Asia: The Causes and Consequences of the Kargil Conflict*, Peter R. Lavoy, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pages 144-170, at 153.

local aggression.”<sup>11</sup> Hart was probably looking back to the Korean War and the nascent First Indochina War, where Soviet armed and supported forces fought against Western or Western-backed powers. Soviet and Chinese support for communists in the Second (American) Vietnam War and U.S. support for the Mujahideen in the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan also support this argument. Both were undertaken with the (correct) assumption that the level of contemplated support would not precipitate conventional or nuclear response from adversaries unwilling to risk nuclear war over a peripheral theater with a relatively low value of the object.

The data supports this; following the advent of mutually assured destruction, the world observed a proliferation of low-level conflicts.<sup>12</sup> An example of this in the modern era is the Indian subcontinent. Pakistan frustrated Indian hopes and expectations that nuclear equilibrium would end low-level Pakistani-directed Islamist violence against Indians.<sup>13</sup> In Kargil in 1999, Pakistan sent covert infantry forces over the Line of Control (LoC) just a year after it and India became declared nuclear states. It did so, risking direct conflict with a nuclear-armed strategic competitor, with the expectation that Indian fear of nuclear escalation would pressure the Indian side to accept a fiat accompli. Moreover, in an effort to try and play the international dimension to its advantage, Pakistan banked on the strong international preference against nuclear war to support this outcome and pressure India not to respond. Even once both these assumptions proved incorrect (the Indians responded forcefully to retake all captured territory, and the U.S. pressured Pakistan to withdraw), Pakistan continued to sponsor (but disavow) terrorist attacks within Kashmir and even Indian cities. Thus, Pakistan’s “nuclear weapons program encourages

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Kadercan, Burak. “Nuclear Proliferation and Arms Races” (U.S. Naval War College Lecture, Newport, RI, 3 Feb 2023).

<sup>13</sup> Hoyt, “Kargil: The Nuclear Dimension,” at 145.

risk-seeking behavior, which has often led to crisis... (including) militarized disputes short of war.”<sup>14</sup>

Putin’s Russia also likely (correctly) predicted its actions against Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014, Ukraine again in 2022, involvement in the U.S. 2016 election, and other cyber-attacks on the U.S./NATO allies would not elicit any direct Western military interference due in part to concerns of nuclear escalation. On the same token, U.S. and European aid to Ukraine is predicated on the assumption that Russia will not risk nuclear war by attacking the countries that are directly and overtly supplying lethal military assistance, threats to do so notwithstanding. The last case differs from the other examples in that NATO’s conventional overmatch also deters Russia.

A counterargument to the above is that low-level/proxy/ or peripheral theaters are familiar to strategic competition. They occurred within strategic competitions long before nuclear weapons or the security/insecurity paradox. Athenian and Spartan support for myriad smaller city-states, French support for American colonists, British support to Portuguese and Spanish guerrillas, French support to dissidents in Ireland, British subversion of the continental system, Imperial German proffers to Mexico, Western Support for White Russians, and Soviet and Fascist support to opposing sides of the Spanish Civil War all occurred before nuclear weapons. One can therefore argue that this facet of strategic competition is marked by continuity through the atomic age rather than change because of it.

However, while low-level conflict below the threshold of state-on-state war has long been part of strategic competition, the stability/instability paradox means that states which might

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<sup>14</sup> Fair, C. Christine. *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army’s Way of War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, at 225.

otherwise be deterred from this low-level action by the conventional response (e.g., Pakistan with India) are emboldened by their nuclear umbrella. Dr. Fair's analysis of the increase in low-level Pakistan attacks following their atomic tests is persuasive.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the Cold War consisted of nothing but low-level and proxy conflicts between the two superpowers enabled by the security of a nuclear umbrella. All were executed by individuals deliberately calculating the risk of nuclear escalation within their adversary's decision-making process, pushing as far as they believed they could get away with before crossing red lines.

The Truman administration, for example, refused to bomb north of the Yalu River in the Korean War out of fear of escalating the conflict with a nuclear-armed Soviet Union. The Johnson administration micromanaged tactical targeting decisions in North Vietnam, *sortie* by *sortie*, to avoid unwanted escalation with the Soviets or Chinese. Similarly, the Nixon administration's decision to initiate Linebacker I and II was primarily predicated on their (correct) assessment that the Sino-Soviet split meant they could bomb in and around Hanoi without triggering a conventional or nuclear response from either the PRC or Soviet Union. A decade later, the U.S. felt confident enough to spend hundreds of millions (eventually billions) of dollars providing Mujahedeen weapons expressly designed to kill Soviet soldiers. Like in previous conflicts, a line was carefully toed, but the U.S. nevertheless directly contributed to the deaths of tens of thousands of Soviet soldiers, confidently operating under the perceived threshold of retaliation its nuclear arsenal provided. These nuclear age examples of proxy conflict, therefore, represent a fundamental shift in the dynamics of strategic competition.

**Conclusion.** In conclusion, nuclear weapons change the nature of strategic competition by decreasing the likelihood of nuclear state-on-state conflict while increasing the opportunities and

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<sup>15</sup> Fair, at 250-251.

incentives for activities below the perceived threshold of conflict. The implication of the latter point for the U.S., the Joint Force, and our allies is that identifying ways and means to deter “below the threshold” challenges without resorting to conventional or nuclear force is critical. Additionally, with the likelihood of direct conflict with a strategic competitor significantly reduced, financial strength and economic vitality become even more important determinants of long-term success. A victory over said competitor by feat of arms alone via a “quick decisive victory” becomes almost impossible. A successful Grand Strategy that maximizes these factors, solidifies alliance structures, and mobilizes all instruments of national power is indispensable for strategic competition in the nuclear age.