

Foreword

In retrospect, it seems clear that the new era of Great Power competition that is the subject of the chapters in this volume began to take shape almost as soon as the last era had drawn to a close. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the sudden end of the Cold War, the United States found itself in a position of unchallenged (and seemingly unchallengeable) global preponderance. Surveying the scene in the early 1990s, American policymakers quickly decided to put aside their previous grand strategy of containment in favor of what the George H.W. Bush administration initially described as “collective near-term engagement” aimed at the global “promotion of peace and democracy,” and what William Clinton administration national security adviser Anthony Lake subsequently labeled a policy of “engagement and enlargement.”¹ Henceforth, Lake declared, the goal of U.S. policy would be to encourage the spread of “democracy and market economics” to places where these had not yet taken firm root, most notably across the vast expanse of Eurasia, an area that included China, Russia, the newly independent nations of the former Soviet Union, and the former members of its erstwhile empire in Eastern and Central Europe.²

What Lake and his colleagues had in mind was nothing less than the fulfilment of Woodrow Wilson’s vision for an all-encompassing liberal world order, an international system made up of states bound together by free trade, international rules and institutions, and a shared commitment to the principles of democratic governance and universal human rights. This was the third time in the course of the 20th century that American policymakers had sought to remake the world along liberal lines. Wilson’s first attempt, at the close of World War I, had ended in failure. Twenty-five years later his successors would try again, only to find their path blocked by the descent of the Iron Curtain and the start of the Cold War. In place of a truly global liberal order, in the wake of World War II, U.S. policymakers had to settle for a partial, geographically limited subsystem that ultimately came to include the advanced industrial democracies of Western Europe, East Asia, and the Western Hemisphere. Despite its constrained scope, this collection of nations (often referred to loosely and somewhat inaccurately as the “West”) proved to be enormously successful in generating both wealth and power. Over a 40-year period of intense and sometimes dangerous rivalry, its members were able to out innovate, outproduce, and ultimately outlast their Communist competitors.

With the Cold War over, American policymakers hoped, in effect, to extend the boundaries of the Western system, expanding a partial order operating on liberal principles to encompass the entire globe, including nations that had previously chosen to remain outside its limits. Over the course of the 1990s, the United States and its European allies were able to induce the smaller and weaker nations of the former Soviet empire to reshape their economic and political systems along liberal lines by making reform a requirement for full

membership in the Western system. Lacking equivalent leverage with Russia and China, the democracies chose to take the opposite tack: incorporating these major powers as fully as possible into existing institutions (and, in particular, into the international economy) in the hopes that doing so would, in itself, promote liberalizing reforms. It is the failure of this approach, evidence of which has been accumulating for at least the past decade, that set the stage for the new era of Great Power competition.

Traveling by different routes, in the 30 years since the end of the Cold War, Russia and China have ended up in broadly similar positions. The regimes that govern these two powers have managed to integrate into the global economy, enjoying the benefits of international trade and investment without evolving into true market-based economies or surrendering their grip on domestic political power. Indeed, to the contrary, since the turn of the century both the Russian and Chinese states have become more repressive and more militantly nationalistic, tightening their grip over society and the economy at home, while engaging in increasingly aggressive behavior on the international stage.

Vladimir Putin's Russia and Xi Jinping's China are driven by a mix of resentment, insecurity, and ambition.³ Both seek redress for what they regard as past wrongs and humiliations; both feel themselves threatened by the physical proximity of the United States and its democratic allies and by the persistence of an international system built on principles that challenge the legitimacy of their own illiberal regimes. Albeit to varying degrees, both Russia and China are revisionist powers; each aims to alter the status quo in its immediate neighborhood, pushing back what Chinese propagandists describe as "hostile foreign forces" and establishing a zone of effective control along its periphery. As its strength and self-confidence have grown, Beijing has also begun to reveal broader ambitions. In ways that are not yet fully specified, it intends, in Xi's words, to "move closer to the center of the world stage," reshaping existing international rules, norms, and institutions to better reflect its power and serve its interests.⁴

As the authors of several of the chapters in this volume point out, in terms of their relative national power China and Russia appear to be following very different trajectories. In the long run, the former will likely be able to mount a far more serious challenge to the United States and its allies than the latter. Notwithstanding this divergence, there are still some notable similarities in the tactics and techniques that the two nations are currently employing in pursuit of their objectives. Both are using surveillance, censorship, and nationalist propaganda to harden their societies against what they see as the deadly subversive threat of liberal ideas and influences. Both have developed forces and concepts of operation suitable for ambiguous, low-level aggression in the geographic and strategic "gray zone." And both are strengthening their cyber warfare, antisatellite, nuclear, and conventional antiaccess/area-denial capabilities in hopes of deterring the United States from intervening in future large-scale conflicts along their peripheries.

Developments in communications technology, and the vestiges of the failed policies of "enlargement" and "engagement," have left the economies, societies, and political systems of the Western nations open to penetration and manipulation, vulnerabilities that their authoritarian rivals have been quick to discover and exploit. Thanks to the lingering after-effects of the 2008 financial crisis and now the COVID-19 pandemic, the democracies are also weaker and more divided at present than they were throughout most of the Cold War.

For these reasons, at least in its opening stages, the new era of Great Power competition could prove to be even more challenging than the one that preceded it. Success will require creative and wide-ranging thinking of the sort that the Institute for National Strategic Studies was designed to promote, and which the following pages contain.

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July 2020

Notes

¹ For a review of the post–Cold War evolution of U.S. grand strategy, see the series of National Security Strategy documents published between August 1991 and July 1994, available at <<https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1991.pdf?ver=2014-06-25-121158-580>>; <<https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1991.pdf?ver=2014-06-25-121158-580>>; <<https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1993.pdf?ver=2014-06-25-121210-297>>; and <<https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1994.pdf?ver=2014-06-25-121219-500>>.

² See Anthony Lake, “From Containment to Enlargement,” Johns Hopkins University, School of Advanced International Studies, September 21, 1993, available at <<https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/lakedoc.html>>.

³ This section draws on the analysis in Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Authoritarian Challenge: China, Russia and the Threat to the Liberal International Order* (Tokyo: Sasakawa Peace Foundation, 2017), available at <https://www.spf.org/_jpus-j_media/img/investigation/The_Authoritarian_Challenge.pdf>.

⁴ Simon Denyer, “Move over, America. China Is ‘Blazing a New Trail’ for the World,” *Washington Post*, October 19, 2017. For more on what China’s leaders may have in mind, see Nadège Rolland, *China’s Vision for a New World Order*, NBR Special Report #83 (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, January 2020), available at <https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr83_chinasvision_jan2020.pdf>.