



Sailor monitors subsurface contacts while standing watch in sonar control room aboard *Arleigh Burke*-class guided-missile destroyer *USS John S. McCain* during target-tracking training evolution as part of Malabar 2020, Indian Ocean, November 3, 2020 (U.S. Navy/Markus Castaneda)

Avoiding Great Power Phony Wars

By Brent D. Sadler

History does not repeat itself, but it rhymes.

—MARK TWAIN (ATTRIBUTED)

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For some, the end of the Cold War in 1991 was a vindication of democracy's supremacy over dogmatic Marxist ideology—a victory underwritten by the free flow of capital leading to sustained improvements in prosperity wherever capitalism was embraced. Euphoria was so high that, by 1992, ideologically driven war had become a relic, or what Francis Fukuyama called the “end of history.”¹ In the years immediately following, an explosion of freely moving capital across opening markets underwrote the greatest growth of prosperity and reduction in poverty the world had ever seen. That period in history is over, however, having been replaced with the stark realism of Great Power competition.

Today's Great Power competition is over control of economies and the underlying global rules-based order—in other words, state capitalism versus democratic capitalism rather than an ideological competition of governing systems. The stakes are high, and democracy alone does not guarantee success in this strategic competition. As Seva Gunitsky states, “Material success . . . often creates its own legitimacy: regimes become morally appealing simply by virtue of their triumph.”² In this contest, China's economic success and skepticism of democracy are potently captured in the words of Hu Xijin, editor in chief of the state newspaper, *Global Times*. Hu tweeted, along with a photograph of the latest mobile intercontinental ballistic missile, “China was just fine forgoing the ‘good stuff’ of electoral democracy on display in ‘Haiti, Libya, Iraq, and Ukraine.’”³ A consequence of this material success, as president of the World Bank Jim Yong Kim stated in September 2018, was that historic reductions in poverty since the Cold War began to slow. These problems are coincidental with the return to Great Power competition and the incipient fracturing of global markets and common rules-based discourse along evolving modern spheres of influence. The challenge for democratic capitalism is to regain global economic dynamism. Failure to do so could usher in a new era of what Fukuyama labeled an



Soviet prisoners of war dressed in new clothes near Arctic Circle at Rovaniemi, Finland, during Winter War, January 6, 1940 (Courtesy Military Museum of Finland)

age of pessimism, blinding many to the inherent weaknesses of totalitarianism.

In this unfolding age of pessimism, the United States and its key security partners are rethinking their foreign policies. The role of hard power is ascendant and, with it, risks to destructive demagoguery in place of reasoned strategy, as Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan argued in “Competition Without Catastrophe.”⁴ In this new reality, our competitors, namely Russia and China, will constrain approaches and have a vote on outcomes. As Mark Miles and Charles Miller argue, this new era of Great Power competition will likely follow historical precedent and be global in scale and comprehensive in scope of national power as opportunistic competitors seek any advantage.⁵ Acknowledging this reality has been long in coming.

Since the end of the Cold War, assumptions based on U.S. preeminent military and economic power have encouraged generally passive or reactive

national security policies. The 2017 National Security Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy, however, indicate that such assumptions no longer inform competitive approaches to China and Russia. In contemplating a New Cold War, it is necessary to weigh the opportunity costs, as Derek Leebaert does in *The Fifty-Year Wound*.⁶ Based on such lessons, Great Power competition today, specifically with China, requires a comprehensive, coherent approach to succeed—or, as Patrick Cronin and Ryan Neuhard argue, total competition, which encompasses economic, legal, psychological, military, and information spheres.⁷

In Asia, longstanding assumptions and security constructs are being questioned and overturned. Confronted with myriad challenges and uncertainty about U.S. security and diplomatic assurances, Japan under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe shook off pacifism for a proactive comprehensive regional strategy. At the same time, ongoing protests in Hong

Kong challenge the “One Country, Two Systems” premise for peaceful unification between China and Taiwan. In this environment, Taiwan’s January 2020 national elections renewing President Tsai Ing-wen’s leadership have further agitated Beijing’s suspicions that Taiwan’s government might abandon the long-term goal of unification. In the wider context of Great Power competition, Chinese military modernization and expansion, diplomatic efforts to isolate Taiwan, and diversifying economic reliance on One Belt, One Road initiatives support Beijing’s objective of unification with Taiwan—including by force. However, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) would prefer this objective be settled well below the threshold of war with the United States. This approach channels Chinese strategic culture as stated by Sun Tzu: “Hence to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting.”⁸

Effective gradual day-to-day competition, such as the actions of Russia in Ukraine and China in the South China Sea, has shifted the status quo, disadvantaging U.S. and allied interests. Lessons of the interwar period (1920–1940), culminating with the Phony War (October 1939–May 1940), illustrate that failure to be militarily postured for a crisis with a revisionist Great Power makes it more likely to occur. Failing this, it can rapidly develop into a global conflict with significantly dire consequences, as both sides seek advantage through horizontal escalation. With this in mind, leaders can take important lessons from this period as Great Power competition once again heats up, especially regarding contests with China over forced unification with Taiwan. Looking ahead, a key lesson is the imperative to forward posture the military and to resource it to deliver on diplomatic promises to allies as well as invest in the depth of arsenal to wage war should deterrence fail.

The Phony War

National security strategy is evolving to meet the changes of the recent past. It has been almost 30 years since the United States had to contend with the Soviet Union. Today's challenge is compounded as we confront two Great Power competitors: Russia and China. Simply repeating Cold War approaches is unrealistic; China is integrated into the world economy, and Russia is unconstrained by ideology. As the United States, China, and Russia all vie for worldwide influence, preparing for at least some degree of conflict is prudent. At the same time, we must now contend with deterring one opportunistic Great Power while remaining in conflict with the other. Thus, any future Great Power confrontation must be minimized in scope, duration, and scale in order to husband needed resources. In this new era, as in the past, early and decisive action in the transition from crisis to conflict can avert or geographically constrain a prolonged major war. In the Phony War, this was not the case.

For 8 months following the September 1939 invasion of Poland,

Great Britain and France refrained from directly engaging the belligerent Germany in the so-called Phony War. Why attacking was held off rests on factors present today with similarly dire consequences. Then, as today, defense industry was unprepared for a rapid expansion in armaments production, and the military was ill postured to preempt an adversary's fait accompli action and not resourced for a prolonged major war.

As the United States once again enters an era of Great Power competition, important lessons can be gained from examining the Phony War. Those lessons are most apt for East Asia. That said, events since 2014 in Europe provide a cautionary tale of "hybrid warfare" waged by Russia in Ukraine.⁹ However, with U.S. military support provided to Ukraine, the proximity of North Atlantic Treaty Organization forces to the country, and ceasefires holding the peace, the danger of major war appears greater in Asia. In this region, U.S. treaty networks' disposition of opposing forces and potential flash points for major war make a better, but still imperfect, modern analog for the Phony War. Just as navies and air forces were most active globally during the brief Phony War period, the same would hold true for a contemporary confrontation with China. Moreover, as armies and marine corps introduce new power projection systems, they too will be critical players in gaining early positional advantage as major conflict unfolds in the future. The lessons of the Phony War are therefore particularly relevant as national leadership considers the costs of building larger and more lethal militaries. To better understand the implications of the Phony War today, it is important to consider its origins in the forces weighing on national leaders during the interwar years of 1920–1940.

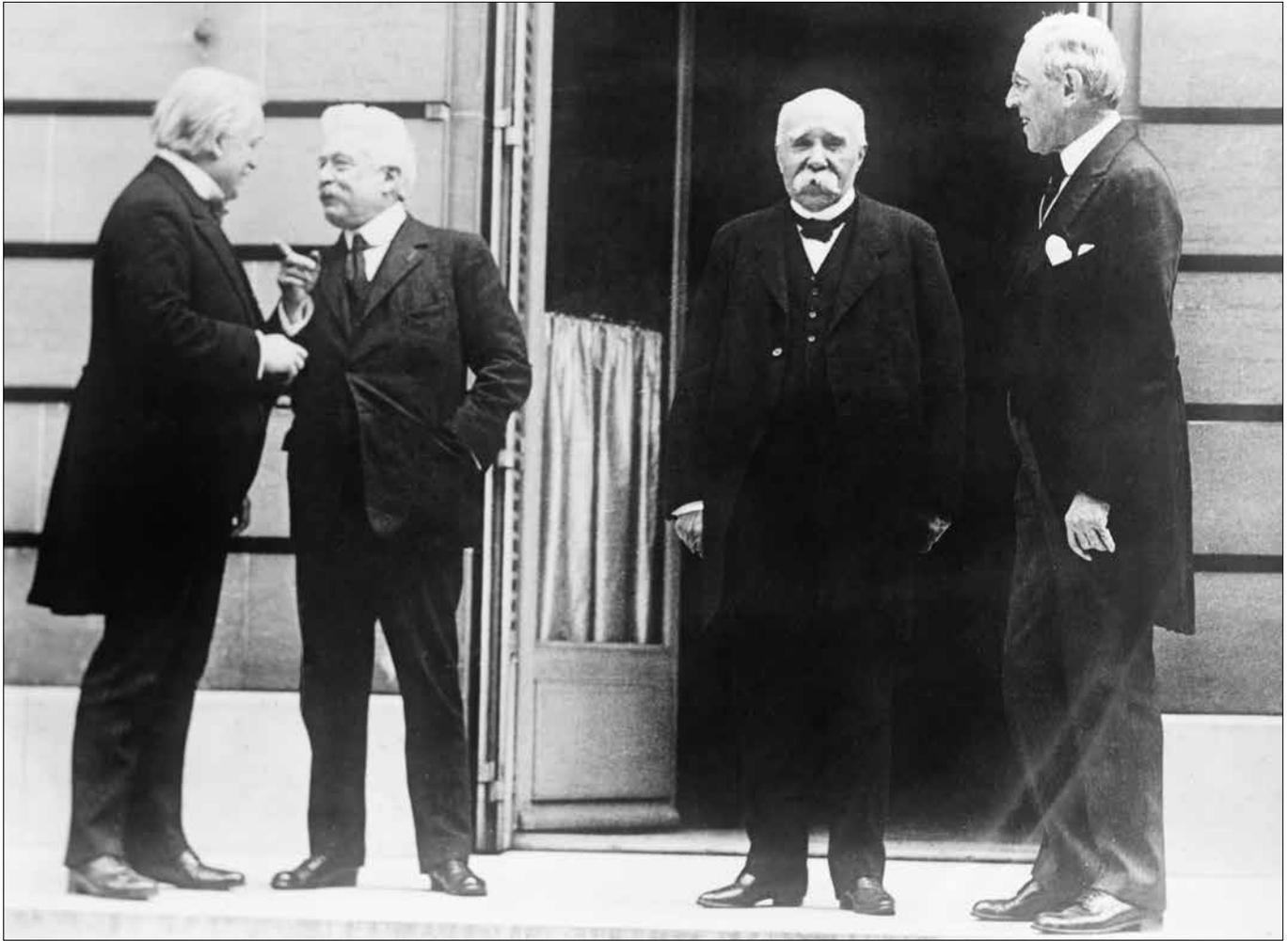
Interwar Wishful Thinking

In the period immediately following World War I, seeds of the Phony War were planted with optimism and faith that major war would never again be considered by any rational nation. Germinations of faith in collective self-defense never materialized, however,

without required defense investments. Meanwhile, hatred for the Versailles Treaty ending the Great War blossomed in newly revisionist nations, most notably apparent in Germany's foreign policy under the guidance of Foreign Minister Gustav Stresemann (1923–1929) and later Adolf Hitler (1933–1945). Erosions of postwar peace were at first gradual and then accelerated into unstoppable torrents unleashed in 1939. As a reflection of political leaders' predilections, military contingency planning did little to inform needed investments or convince leaders of any course correction that would have precluded the Phony War.

However, it is unfair to judge interwar leaders without considering the horrors and living memories of World War I. So immense was the scale of destruction and death enabled by new weapons, such as the airplane and poison gas, that there was little faith that technology could solve the world's problems. At the same time, politics of the Big Lie propaganda and scapegoating too often enabled oversimplified policies that channeled class or race differences to solve complex problems.¹⁰ As a frontline Great Power defending the Versailles Peace Treaty, France rarely managed the needed consistency of policy and investment. Between 1920 and 1940, the average life expectancy of a French government was 7 months.¹¹ Wartime ghosts simultaneously haunted domestic politics in France, where 17.6 percent of the armed forces were killed and 1.1 million were left catastrophically injured.¹² In the case of France, going it alone in building the military needed to bolster forceful diplomacy in defense of Versailles was unsustainable.

France retained military supremacy in continental Europe for some time while acting to defend Versailles. In 1923, France unilaterally occupied the Rhineland to extract reparations from Germany in accordance with the Versailles Treaty. The result was counterproductive, resulting in pressure on the franc and, most important, a rift with Britain on Versailles enforcement.¹³ France's failure in the Rhineland gave way in 1925 to alliance-building. The



Council of Four at World War I Paris Peace Conference, in Versailles, May 27, 1919; from left, David Lloyd George (UK), Vittorio Emanuele Orlando (Italy), Georges Clemenceau (France), and President Woodrow Wilson (U.S. Army Signal Corps/Edward N. Jackson)

Locarno Treaties of October 1925 were originally envisioned as an alliance to safeguard against German aggression in Western Europe. However, in acquiescing to German fears of encirclement—not unlike contemporary Chinese complaints of U.S. strategy—the treaty devolved to a toothless collective security arrangement that included Germany in the end.¹⁴ In September 1926, German entry into this treaty and the League of Nations buoyed British Prime Minister David Lloyd George's earlier claim in the House of Commons that the last Great War had been fought.¹⁵ Belgium, unimpressed with the protections offered by Locarno, instead pursued determined neutrality as a defense against German invasion. Overall, Locarno greatly strengthened a bitter and revisionist Germany by weakening France's commitments in Eastern

Europe, thereby reducing the potential of a two-front war.¹⁶

French and British war-planning consequently became increasingly defensive and eventually succumbed to the economic realities of the 1930s Great Depression, Great Britain garrisoning forces contended with anticolonial challenges across its empire, and France built the Maginot Line.¹⁷ At the same time, the interwar period witnessed continuous technological change—changes that military planners sought to harness in cost-effective ways, such as strategic bombing while utilizing the full power of a mobilized industrial nation for deterring a future war through economic strength or a rapid victory.¹⁸ For the British, strategic bombing mitigated the need for a large continental army and rationalized weak investments in armaments. Despite

British faith in the deterrent value of strategic bombing, the study of its wartime use was never adequate to convince political leadership that its use would not imperil its moral high ground—critical to ensuring the flow of vital resources in a prolonged war of attrition. The result was that, when planning for strategic bombing campaigns began in 1938, there was little warfighting capacity behind deterrence.¹⁹ Fortifications, such as the Maginot Line in France, planned for a Belgium extension and compensated limited Allied forces across a continuous front from which the Germans might attack in “integral defense.”²⁰ Critical to success was developing something not achieved in the interwar years, a militarily effective collective defense mechanism among the Low Countries, principally Belgium.²¹

Nonetheless, united, the victors of World War I—Italy, Great Britain, and France—retained deterrence advantage over revanchist Germany. However, events in 1935 accelerated the deterioration of Versailles. That year, Hitler reintroduced conscription while making no secret of his designs on Austria. This stoked Benito Mussolini's fear of German demands for return of ethnically German South Tirol, leading to the final agreement in April of the victors to resist German attempts to change the Versailles Treaty by force.²² This so-called Stresa Front almost immediately proved tenuous when Mussolini invaded present-day Ethiopia that October and became totally useless in deterring German annexation of Austria in March 1938. French and British ineffectiveness over Austria bolstered Mussolini's conviction that Germany was the better ally.²³

During the 1930s depression in London, rather than investing in rearmament and the concepts of airpower and mechanized warfare espoused by Basil Liddell Hart, the predominant thinking was that defense was strongest because of a strong economy. Proliferate expenditures followed foreign exchanges in an effort to prop up the sterling at the expense of critical investment in armaments. Liddell Hart eventually resigned from his position as personal advisor to Minister for Coordination of Defense Thomas Inskip.²⁴ Unfortunately, British reporting from Berlin failed to inform such investment choices. From 1937, in Berlin, British Ambassador Nevile Meyrick Henderson acted as a willing conduit for Nazi propaganda vindicating German designs on Czechoslovakia in his reports to London, while complaining to his Nazi counterparts of Czech intransigence.²⁵ Only after the September 1938 Munich Agreement, while Ambassador Henderson was in London for medical treatment from November 1938 to February 1939, was London finally able to form a realistic picture of German policies, which decisively effected a change of government threat perceptions.²⁶

Interwar military planners and their political leaders suffered a malaise. By eschewing their responsibility, they failed to

develop countermeasures for a wide range of German *fait accompli* actions, produce a family of war plans better appreciating the uncertainties of war, or forcefully inform the electorate of the strategic consequences of their decisions.²⁷ Incrementally over the 20 interwar years, political decisions shaped the methods and means available to war planners and diplomats alike. Specific shortcomings included failure to legitimize the cause to uphold the Versailles Treaty; paralysis in the face of the terrors of modern warfare, notably aerial bombing demonstrated in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War at Guernica; operational paralysis against an overrated or misunderstood adversary; poor coordination with neutral powers to affect adversary strategic calculations; and failure to fully resource and exercise the military for potential counterattacks that might end or deescalate conflict.²⁸

Events of the interwar years—accelerating with Hitler's 1933 rise in Germany—convinced revisionists in Berlin, Tokyo, Rome, and Moscow that war was inevitable to achieve their aims.

Positional Prelude

Flush with the successful 1938 annexations of Austria and Czechoslovakia, Hitler focused next on conquering Poland. Hitler's theory of victory was a limited war in which intervention by the French and British would be unlikely or irrelevant through a *fait accompli* operation (a dynamic that bears striking similarities to China's contemporary theory for victory over Taiwan).²⁹ Key to Hitler's plan was isolating Poland diplomatically, employing the untested blitzkrieg concept of operations for rapid military victory, and thus leveraging political discord in London and Paris to delay an Allied attack from the west. However, uncertainty about Russia's reaction constrained Hitler for a time.

Hitler's machinations in Poland were conditioned on outcomes of a bloody border battle raging a world away. Since May 1939, Soviet and Mongolian forces had been engaged in a battle with the Japanese along their Manchurian border, known as the Battles of Khalkhin Gol. Joseph Stalin, calculating a war in

Europe was on the horizon, needed to secure both his Far Eastern flank and his European borders by moving forces west. After being kept a state secret until 1994, the Russian government confirmed that the Soviet special archives did in fact record a controversial August 19, 1939, Politburo session with Stalin. That discussion concluded it was in Soviet interests to enter into an agreement with Germany over the fate of Poland, thereby instigating a war between Germany and France and Great Britain. Moreover, that war should be prolonged so as to maximize Soviet strategic advantage in a later anticapitalist war.³⁰ With this in mind, following early Soviet successes in the August 20 Nomonhan offensive, Stalin gave the go-ahead to proceed with negotiations of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with Germany. That pact, sealed on August 24, was followed with Hitler's order on August 27 to commence operations in Poland.³¹ With the Red Army massed on the Polish border, and despite German protests on September 3, Stalin withheld his forces. Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov responded days later that the time for Soviet action was not opportune.³² That time would come September 17, after the Japanese agreed to a ceasefire on September 15 and the French Saar offensive wound down.³³ While Hitler and the Allies were focused on Poland, Stalin proceeded to solidify Soviet military positions in the Baltic in the winter of 1939.

Because of the success of blitzkrieg in 1940, France's defeat is often assumed. However, in reality it was a very closely played German gamble, relying on time to shift forces from Poland to meet the Allies in the West and on untested technologies and concepts of operation. The risk was made starker by Germany's limited mechanization of its army, seemingly mitigating any advantage blitzkrieg would afford through 1940. In fact, at that time, net assessments of military power between France and Germany were relatively balanced, with an edge given to France.³⁴ Given this balance, it was critical that Hitler isolate Poland diplomatically while deterring Allied intervention—a key element being the

Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. This relative balance contributed to Allied confidence in fighting a defensive war and ensuing relative inaction during the Phony War.

The Eastern War

On September 1, 1939, Hitler invaded Poland, calculating correctly that the Allies would not intervene. Weak political leadership and shaky domestic political mandates played out in the delayed declaration of war on Germany in both London and Paris.³⁵ After a prolonged back and forth, the two Allies finally agreed on September 3 to declare war against Germany. No appreciable assistance ever made its way to Poland.

However, the seeds of Hitler's eventual downfall were also planted at this time. Hitler, confident of a limited war, failed to shift Germany's economy to prepare for what would be a major sustained war. Albert Speer eventually shifted Germany's economy in 1942, almost 3 years after invading Poland.

As Hitler solidified gains in the east, political confusion in Paris and London provided him an unmolested period in which to regroup and redirect his forces for the conquest of France. In the months before and during the Phony War, governments in Paris and London had weak mandates, culminating in new governments in Paris (March 1940) and London (May 1940). However, by 1938 France and Great Britain realized that to check any German onslaught on Versailles, they would have to threaten a two-front war.

Missed Opportunity

By late 1938, the Poles realized the threat of invasion was imminent and looked for assurances of support from the French and British. The genesis for this assurance was Hitler's annexation of Czechoslovakia. Subsequently, on March 31, 1939, Paris and London made commitments to Poland and Romania that their militaries were ill positioned to deliver.³⁶ Among those commitments was the Saar offensive.

Originally, the Saar offensive in the Rhine River Valley was to include upward of 40 French divisions and associated

armor and artillery to divert German forces engaged in Poland. In actuality, only 11 divisions were committed from September 7 to 17 and advanced a mere 5 miles into German territory.³⁷ The offensive stalled because French military commander in chief General Maurice Gamelin's assessed advantage rested on fighting a defensive war on known ground—assumed to be in Belgium per “integral defense.” To achieve this position, French planning centered on the Maginot Line and combined operations to bolster a defensive line in Belgium, which proved too little, too late. This missed opportunity in the Saar was made clear in testimony by German chief of operation staff General Alfred Jodl at his Nuremberg trial: “If we did not collapse already in the year 1939 that was due only to the fact that during the Polish campaign, the approximately 110 French and British divisions in the West were held completely inactive against the 23 German divisions.”³⁸ Wartime German General Siegfried Westphal further stated, “Had the French attacked in force in September 1939 the German Army would have only been able to hold out for two weeks.”³⁹

Opportunism

Driven by revanchist aspirations and fears of a German advance through the Baltic states, Stalin launched a pressure campaign of intimidation and coercion to reestablish a Baltic presence through military basing and access rights. Stalin received his pretext after a day of operations against Poland. On September 18, a Polish submarine was allowed to depart Estonia—a violation in Stalin's eyes of Estonia's declared neutrality. This event triggered a Soviet ultimatum on September 24. Latvia and Lithuania followed suit by agreeing to host Russian bases by October 10, with allowance for 75,000 Red Army soldiers in these three countries.⁴⁰ These Baltic sites would only regain their independence more than 50 years later with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Only Finland refused Stalin's demands. On the heels of Poland's October dissolution, Russia invaded Finland on

November 30, beginning the Winter War—a notable example of military opportunism. The publics in London and Paris immediately called for action to defend the brave Finns. With no good options, London's military chiefs were relieved when the Moscow Peace Treaty was signed March 12, 1940.⁴¹ In Paris, however, the mood was unforgiving and resulted in the March 20 resignation of Prime Minister Édouard Daladier, which ushered in the more energetic Paul Reynaud.⁴² The speed of events in the Baltic, and the lack of good military options, compounded the underlying political confusion and distracted military preparation for the main battle to come in France. Next to feel the political pinch at home would be London.

Too Little, Too Late

British military interests in neutral Norway were an open secret. For months, British politicians and military leaders had publicly signaled the need for action, including the mining of Norwegian harbors.⁴³ Norway was important because of geography—a long coastline affording access to the North Atlantic—and as a major transshipment source of German steel. The February 1940 *Altmark* incident, however, catalyzed German concerns into action. German ship *Altmark* had escaped the Battle of River Plate in December 1939, carrying British prisoners taken during commerce raiding by the cruiser *Admiral Graf Spee*.⁴⁴ Hitler was enraged when *Altmark* was seized in Norwegian territorial waters by a British boarding party. The result was the freeing of 300 British prisoners, and Hitler's greenlighting of German support of a Norwegian coup led by Norwegian military officer and Nazi collaborator Vidkun Quisling.

Confusion and wasted time ensued in March, as Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain redirected an expeditionary force readying for action in Finland to instead invade Norway. However, Hitler outmaneuvered the Allies and invaded Denmark and Norway on April 9. The ill-prepared and limited British forces were caught off guard. This failure would

bring Winston Churchill to the premiership on the same day the Germans opened the Western Front.

The Un-Phony War

During the Phony War, all the belligerents' navies and air forces were actively engaged, thus making it a Phony War only in name for these services:

- Sinking of the British aircraft carrier HMS *Courageous* by a U-29 on September 17, 1939; 519 killed.
- Sinking of the British battleship HMS *Royal Oak* by a U-47 on October 14, 1939; 833 killed.
- Luftwaffe air raids on Great Britain began on October 16, 1939, when Junkers Ju-88s attacked British warships at Rosyth on the Firth of Forth.
- Following a months-long hunt across the South Atlantic and Indian oceans, in September–December 1939 German commerce raider *Admiral Graf Spee* was engaged and scuttled at the Battle of the River Plate off the coast of Uruguay.
- On February 19, 1940, failed German Operation *Wikingera* intended to disrupt British North Sea maritime activity around the Dogger Bank. Two destroyers were lost to mines and friendly fire from the Luftwaffe; 600 German sailors were killed without encountering Allied forces.

During the Napoleonic Wars, competition between land power France and naval power Great Britain was often imagined as a fight between a whale and elephant, in which both were dominant in their domains but limited in where they could bring their force to bear on the other. The analogy will not apply in a modern conflict with effective long-range strike capabilities targeting land, sea, and air forces. Moreover, long-range strike and cyber capabilities proliferate so thoroughly today that U.S. forces no longer enjoy the luxury distance provides from attack.

The notion that proximity and access to enemy forces for strikes from sea or air determine the pace of early

military actions remains unchanged. Today, this notion is compounded by space and cyber actions that would figure prominently during the opening phase of conflict. During the Phony War, British global naval presence and German commerce attacks on the high seas ensured maritime forces were actively engaged early in battle. However, in the near future, as U.S. ground forces invest in new long-range strike and antishipping capabilities unencumbered by the now-defunct Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, the Army and Marine Corps will be critical and active early players in any future East Asia conflict. The Army has already moved forward on developing Deep Strike missiles for attacking moving targets out to 309 miles, making the Army a future power to contend with in maritime Asia.

Where Is Today's Decisive Theater?

On May 10, 1940, the Phony War came to an abrupt close with Hitler's stunning and successful move through the Ardennes. Once massed armies of the belligerents came into contact, what followed was a prolonged, brutish, and bloody war lasting another 5 years and resulting in horrific losses of life. These losses were not inevitable, and conditions around contemporary flash points have some similarity to preconditions of the Phony War.

Belgium's actions during the Phony War are instructive and belie the importance of having practiced access and posture with Allies well in advance of a crisis. In the global competition with China, U.S. alliances are our greatest asset, but they must be modernized to remain relevant in a changing security environment.⁴⁵ Consider recent efforts in the Philippines, where Japan has joined U.S. efforts to improve the Philippine coast guard and navy.⁴⁶ This has been possible only because Japan made legislative and constitutional adjustments for a proactive regional role. Critical in this Japanese endeavor has been the 2015 revision of the U.S.-Japan Defense Guidelines and constitutional reinterpretations allowing collective self-defense.

This has resulted in both nations committing to active and continuous collaboration of national policy and military operations through the newly established Alliance Coordination Mechanism and Bilateral Enterprise. While the alliance with Japan is rapidly evolving, more is needed to modernize and network our alliances to avoid the mistakes of 1939 Belgium.

Russian and Chinese naval activity deep in the Pacific is challenging assumptions of free movement by forces critical to East Asia contingencies. This reality makes Pacific island nations vital partners in any showdown in Asia. Yet many of these nations are challenged to adequately police their economic exclusion zones, which has resulted in significant financial and environmental losses.⁴⁷ In the face of growing Chinese influence, there is an opportunity for the Department of the Interior and the Department of Defense to revitalize historical relationships and recapitalize outdated infrastructure. Such investments are important to bolstering local economies while facilitating the cost-effective U.S. presence needed to secure vital sea and air lines.

Closer to coastal China in the Western Pacific, allies and the balance of U.S. Pacific forces are within range of thousands of Chinese ballistic and cruise missiles. Countering this threat and undermining Chinese counterintervention strategy represent the most significant challenges to securing long-term U.S. interests.⁴⁸ Overcoming the challenges will inform future defense investments for the foreseeable future.

An important question, then, is where the modern version of an Ardennes will occur. During the Cold War, this was a strike from the Eastern Bloc through the Fulda Gap. Determining the decisive theater is critical to informing military posture and capability investments as well as focusing diplomatic initiatives to secure proximate allies. Given technological and geopolitical dynamics today, determining the decisive theater is complicated by the fact that two geographically separate Great Powers must be considered. The latest National Military Strategy and

National Defense Strategy embrace Great Power competition with China and Russia, yet both fall short by too broadly identifying today's decisive theaters as the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and Middle East. Missing is more specific mention of a modern Fulda Gap. That said, informed by Departments of Defense and State public statements, the greater challenge is China's pointing to the decisive theater in maritime East Asia.

Similar to Berlin's position in the Cold War, Taiwan would likely be a catalyst today for any Great Power war. This position is made urgent considering that 2020 national elections returned to Taiwan a government that Beijing considers suspect. Similar suspicions led to a 1996 crisis, when the Chinese employed missile tests to intimidate Taiwan during elections. This might occur again today, but China has improved its capacity for war at long range, elevating potential for miscalculation and escalation.

Rhyming with Taiwan

Like Stalin's and Hitler's revanchist aims in Poland, the Chinese Communist Party is similarly motivated to rein in Taiwan and end its *de facto* independence. The CCP's motivation is more than revanchism—it is to erase an example of successful Chinese democratic capitalism that threatens the legitimacy of communist dominance in China. In this context, the 2016 election of independence-minded Tsai Ing-wen as Taiwan's president agitates the CCP. Triggering a resumption of Chinese efforts to isolate Taiwan, six nations dropped diplomatic relations with the island from 2016 through late 2018.⁴⁹ Phony War parallels are relevant here: In a potential Taiwan conflict, allies' militaries optimized for defense near the conflict are likely to assume a passive posture as the United States musters forces, ramps up armament production, rallies political will, and moves forces through a substantial Chinese antiaccess and area-denial (A2/AD) umbrella stretching hundreds of miles into the Philippine Sea.⁵⁰ Moreover, China's recent South China Sea island-building as an extension of its

A2/AD umbrella has a chilling effect on any prospective Southeast Asian partner. Given these challenges, during the initial weeks of potential crisis, the chance of a modern Phony War is appreciable. With this in mind, consider the following:

- Diplomatic efforts, such as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and the absence of Allied forces in Eastern Europe in 1939 precluded military support for Poland. A contemporary example is China's diplomatic efforts to flip countries' recognition of Taiwan. Moreover, not unlike 1939–1940 Europe, opportunism and uncertainty over the outcome of any Asian contest likely would engender a high degree of diplomatic duplicity during the early phases of a future contest. It would be a contemporary dynamic of Mao Zedong's "Fight, Fight, Talk, Talk" 1940s approach, which, while placating U.S. pressure to negotiate with nationalist forces, continued waging a prolonged and successful civil war.⁵¹ Today, as in the interwar period, the United States and its allies are striving to preserve the status quo—the rules-based order—in a politically defensive environment.⁵² China's military buildup and displays of ballistic missiles have, like the Soviet buildup of theater nuclear weapons in the Cold War and Hitler's Siegfried Line, won political victories while paralyzing effective responses to gray zone challenges of the status quo.⁵³ Plans that assume fixed alliances and constellations of partners will fail, as did assumptions of German-Soviet enmity in 1939.⁵⁴
- Belgium's steadfast neutrality and failure to allow French forces to enter and bolster defenses during the Phony War prevented adequate combined operations ahead of Hitler's invasion. A modern version of integral defense gaining traction today is what Andrew Krepinevich calls "Archipelagic Defense," which employs land-based long-range strike platforms across the First Island Chain.⁵⁵ Such forces elevate

the cost of any Chinese revisionist moves in East Asia.⁵⁶ The Philippines, South Korea, and Japan are formal U.S. allies at different levels of military competency and specialization. In the face of rapid Chinese military growth and modernization, coordinated operations among all Asian allies, including Australia, are imperative for modern integral defense in maritime East Asia. Moves to make existing exercises increasingly multilateral, such as 2019's Exercise Balikatan in the Philippines, are a step in the right direction but arguably could be scaled up.⁵⁷ Also hopeful is the increasing operationalization in the 2020 iteration of the maritime Malabar Exercise by the United States, Australia, Japan, and India.⁵⁸ Likewise, standardizing and routinizing logistics and access among allies could speed the flow and sustainment of forces early in a future crisis.

- Resolution of distant conflicts, such as at Nomonhan, can alter strategic calculations and pique an aggressor to act. For China, effectively resolving its border dispute and turning strategic competition into a comprehensive strategic partnership with Russia has enabled newfound military confidence. Following China's entry to the World Trade Organization in 2001, economic growth and inflows of capital accelerated China's military modernization. By 2008, China and Russia had resolved their borders; China's military capacity outstripped Russia's, giving China a freer hand to invest in naval and strike capabilities critical in a war with Taiwan. Before this time, the majority of Chinese naval vessels were considered obsolete or suitable only for coastal missions. However, by 2015 following a remarkable building program, China's navy had become overwhelmingly a blue water fleet, the majority of which was considered modern.⁵⁹ Compared with the U.S. Navy's rather static build rate in 2008–2019, China's navy commissioned on average nine new



Finnish Maxim M/32-33 machine gun nest 100 meters from Soviet forces, located approximately 5 kilometers north of Lemetti (area of the modern Pitkyarantky District, Russia), during Winter War, February 21, 1940 (Courtesy Military Museum of Finland)

modern warships annually.⁶⁰ Measured another way, the total annual tonnage of new warships China put to sea in 2008 was more than 29,000 tons, growing to more than 187,000 tons by 2017—roughly doubling that of U.S. production over 2015–2017.⁶¹ Should China succeed in its ongoing suppression of the Uighurs⁶² and resolve border disputes with India,⁶³ Beijing could be further emboldened to act more aggressively in its maritime periphery.

- Strategic initiatives to isolate a belligerent from needed resources broadened the war through horizontal escalation. China’s One Belt, One Road initiative, begun in 2013, has multibillion-dollar development projects in over 126 countries, and at 2019’s Belt and Road Forum, new programs worth \$64 billion were penned.⁶⁴ This portends a growing range of enticing venues for horizon-

tal escalation by all sides, potentially distracting from the main effort in East Asia.

- So-called “fifth columns” softened targets, such as the Sudeten German Free Corps in 1938 Czechoslovakia, while influence campaigns sought to benefit from or sow domestic political disunity. These campaigns included political assassinations aimed to usher in favorable governments—one example was the 1937 killing of antifascists during severe national strikes in France by right-wing terrorist group Cagoule at the behest of Mussolini’s Italy.⁶⁵ Sadly, there has in recent years been a similar rise in attempted and successful political assassinations by Russia (for example, Aleksei Navalny, Aleksander Litvinenko, Sergei Skripal⁶⁶) and abductions by the CCP (for example, Gui Minhai, Xiao Jianhua, Peng Ming⁶⁷) as a

tool of statecraft. Moreover, for the past several years, the United States has been victimized by a Russian influence campaign to undermine faith in our democracy.⁶⁸ China, too, has been active in this realm, with controversial donations to politicians in Australia and New Zealand, purchases of Western media firms, and a global network of schools ostensibly spreading Confucius’s teachings.⁶⁹ China’s reach today is pervasive; for example, CCP leaders pressured Marriot to fire Roy Jones, a social media manager, for using a company Facebook account to “like” a post about Tibet.⁷⁰ Rob Joyce, a former senior cybersecurity advisor to the National Security Council, summarized this environment: “Russia is the hurricane: It comes in fast and hard . . . China is climate change: long, slow, pervasive.”⁷¹ China’s threat today is real and empowered

through social media, which makes it much more challenging than 1939 Germany.⁷² Moreover, CCP influence today is often obscured by self-censoring. One example is Hollywood moguls cutting material unacceptable to CCP censors as a way to gain access to the lucrative China market. Another example is a late 2019 commotion involving the National Basketball Association. This began with Houston Rockets general manager Daryl Morey's October 4, 2019, tweet in support of Hong Kong democracy protesters and ended when star player LeBron James publicly excoriated Morey.⁷³ If unchecked, such caustic influence on the electorate risks becoming conventional thinking, in turn constraining political leaders' options. At worst, this can imperil effective political decisionmaking at critical moments of a crisis.

- When Hitler shifted the German economy to a war footing in 1942, this led to severe armament and fuel shortages by 1944.⁷⁴ Hardening U.S. industry requires building bulwarks against cyber attack and intellectual theft and bolstering the diversification of supply chains and the home-steading of critical production. At the same time, counterproliferation and counterillicit arms production tools need sharpening. During the interwar years, German company Krupp reconstituted a submarine force virtually out of thin air based in the Netherlands to avoid constraints of the Versailles Treaty.⁷⁵ Today, the extent to which global production lines have been integrated will have unforeseen implications, likely complicating prosecution of conflict in unexpected ways.⁷⁶ A recent example was during the start of the COVID-19 crisis, when China (where the United States sources over 80 percent of its antibiotics) threatened to withhold pharmaceutical exports.⁷⁷ Hardening industry and global supply chains would be vital in sustaining prolonged operations in a modern crisis.

- Overconfidence in dated or untested concepts of operations and theories of victory—principally France's adherence to a defensive posture when pressing the Saar attack—could have halted World War II in 1939. Today, excessive confidence in untested concepts at scale in contested environments has potential for disastrous outcomes in a Taiwan crisis. For China, this is its reliance on A2/AD backed by antiship ballistic missiles. For the United States, this is its reliance on Third Offset advanced warfighting technologies and concepts such as multidomain operations and maritime distributed operations.⁷⁸
- Third-party opportunism, such as Stalin's Winter War, will be a feature of contemporary Great Power competition. Moreover, Russia could once again seek gains while China and the United States are preoccupied in crisis. More likely, and more perilous, would be if Russia or China acts as a spoiler in order to prolong a crisis in which the United States finds itself—a ploy Stalin attempted when he encouraged the 1950 Korean War.⁷⁹

Conclusion

War need not be a foregone conclusion between today's Great Powers. However, failure to heed historical insights from the Phony War could allow a crisis to become a long war. Given that the nature of competition in Asia is largely maritime, our naval and expeditionary forces must be prepared for sustained and significant operations from the earliest onset of crisis. This necessitates protecting the homeland from caustic influences such that political will and military options remain aligned, therefore enabling prompt action when opportunity avails.

There is arguably much work to be done to educate the electorate on the stakes of today's Great Power competition. In the meantime, it is the responsibility of our military, in concert with our allies, to develop, exercise,

and refine a range of dynamic new ways of war. Most necessary is substantially testing these concepts in the field to accelerate learning and planning that encompass a dynamic range of crises.

Managing crises among competing Great Powers is vital to avoid—and, if needed, constrain—conflict imperiling today's rules-based order. At premium will be the ability to effectively predict and posture forces to preempt a would-be challenger's *fait accompli* offensive. Doing so requires renewed investment in alliances, military presence, and expeditionary capabilities. At the same time, reinvigorating democratic capitalism is vital to afford the prolonged cost of competition, while also attracting partner nations in common causes. Likewise, access to and contributions from partner nations will be critical to ensure our combined forces are postured to peacefully protect and enhance global democratic capitalism.

The Phony War demonstrated the consequences of being unable to employ forces where most effective for deterrence—and inevitably for combat. Ensuring this fallacy is not repeated is critical, as Elbridge Colby testified before Congress in January 2019.⁸⁰ Defeating the CCP's plausible theory of victory requires rapid action under an A2/AD umbrella, which is intended to make U.S. intervention too costly and provide time for a CCP *fait accompli*.⁸¹ Retaining the posture advantage can confound competitors' strategies but necessitates accepting A2/AD threats in peacetime and crisis—the goal being to deter *fait accompli* actions, contain crises, and preclude a prolonged conflict with another Great Power.

Chance aside, the outcome of war will be determined before the fighting actually starts: the better-postured, -resourced, and -trained Great Power will win. Being appropriately positioned avails time and options for taking the most effective military actions, which 1939 Paris and London lacked. Doing so also signals to an adversary that keeping competition within peaceful means is mutually beneficial. Failing to have a clear idea of how to deter a conflict and options for

responding in crisis makes strategic misdirection and paralysis likely during the precious weeks or months during which the conflict could turn into major war. The complexity of modern Great Power competition, and the rapidity with which escalation can occur, make it imperative the United States and its allies posture themselves to shape and constrain potential conflict, while acting promptly if needed. Therefore, an enhanced presence that is postured and sustained in maritime East Asia is needed. The cost of failing to heed these lessons may lead to outright defeat or a pyrrhic victory following a needlessly long war. JFQ

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