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## **Backing Into World War III**

America must check the assertive, rising powers of Russia and China before it's too late. Accepting spheres of influence is a recipe for disaster

***Скочуючись до третьої світової війни  
Поки не пізно, Америка повинна стримати Росію і Китай, що посилюються і  
самостверджуються. Домовленість про сфери впливу – це готовий рецепт  
катастрофи***

*Необхідно задуматися про два значні тренди в сьогоденному світі. Перший – це все частіші амбіції і зростаюча активність двох великих ревізіоністських держав, якими є Росія і Китай. Другий тренд – це зменшення впевненості в собі, скорочення можливостей і ослаблення волі демократичного світу, і особливо США, які не можуть зберігати панівні позиції в міжнародній системі, що належали їм з 1945 року. Спроба адміністрації США «перезавантажити» відносини з Росією завдала удару по репутації Америки як надійної союзника. Перезавантаження не допомогло поліпшити поведінку Росії. Навпаки, вона надала сміливості Путіну і підштовхнула його до більш жорстких дій. Недостатня реакція Заходу на російське вторгнення в Україну і на захоплення Криму в 2014 році була краще, ніж млява відповідь адміністрації Буша на вторгнення в Грузію; і тим не менше, вона свідчить про небажання американської адміністрації дати відсіч Росії в проголошеній нею сфері своїх інтересів. Насправді, Обама публічно визнав привілейоване становище Росії в Україні, в той час як США і Європа намагалися відстояти суверенітет цієї країни. Якщо надати ревізіоністським державам сфери впливу, це не призведе до миру і спокою, а лише спровокує їх на неминучий конфлікт.*

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Think of two significant trend lines in the world today. One is the increasing ambition and activism of the two great revisionist powers, Russia and China. The other is the declining confidence, capacity, and will of the democratic world, and especially of the United States, to maintain the dominant position it has held in the international system since 1945. As those two lines move closer, as the declining will and capacity of the United States and its allies to maintain the present world order meet the increasing desire and capacity of the revisionist powers to change it, we will reach the moment at which the existing order collapses and the world descends into a phase of brutal anarchy, as it has three times in the past two centuries. The cost of that descent, in lives and treasure, in lost freedoms and lost hope, will be staggering.

Where exactly we are in this classic scenario today, how close the trend lines are to that intersection point is, as always, impossible to know. Are we three years away from a global crisis, or 15?

Americans tend to take the fundamental stability of the international order for granted, even while complaining about the burden the United States carries in preserving that stability. History shows that world orders do collapse, however, and when they do it is often unexpected, rapid, and violent. The late 18th century was the high point of the Enlightenment in Europe, before the continent fell suddenly into the abyss of the Napoleonic Wars. In the first decade of the 20th century, the world's

smartest minds predicted an end to great-power conflict as revolutions in communication and transportation knit economies and people closer together. The most devastating war in history came four years later. The apparent calm of the postwar 1920s became the crisis-ridden 1930s and then another world war. Where exactly we are in this classic scenario today, how close the trend lines are to that intersection point is, as always, impossible to know. Are we three years away from a global crisis, or 15? That we are somewhere on that path, however, is unmistakable.

And while it is too soon to know what effect Donald Trump's presidency will have on these trends, early signs suggest that the new administration is more likely to hasten us toward crisis than slow or reverse these trends. The further accommodation of Russia can only embolden Vladimir Putin, and the tough talk with China will likely lead Beijing to test the new administration's resolve militarily. Whether the president is ready for such a confrontation is entirely unclear. For the moment, he seems not to have thought much about the future ramifications of his rhetoric and his actions.

China and Russia are classic revisionist powers. Although both have never enjoyed greater security from foreign powers than they do today — Russia from its traditional enemies to the west, China from its traditional enemy in the east — they are dissatisfied with the current global configuration of power. Both seek to restore the hegemonic dominance they once enjoyed in their respective regions. For China, that means dominance of East Asia, with countries like Japan, South Korea, and the nations of Southeast Asia both acquiescing to Beijing's will and acting in conformity with China's strategic, economic, and political preferences. That includes American influence withdrawn to the eastern Pacific, behind the Hawaiian Islands. For Russia, it means hegemonic influence in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, which Moscow has traditionally regarded as either part of its empire or part of its sphere of influence. Both Beijing and Moscow seek to redress what they regard as an unfair distribution of power, influence, and honor in the U.S.-led postwar global order. As autocracies, both feel threatened by the dominant democratic powers in the international system and by the democracies on their borders. Both regard the United States as the principal obstacle to their ambitions, and therefore both seek to weaken the American-led international security order that stands in the way of their achieving what they regard as their rightful destinies.

It was good while it lasted

Until fairly recently, Russia and China have faced considerable, almost insuperable, obstacles in achieving their objectives. The chief obstacle has been the power and coherence of the international order itself and its principal promoter and defender. The American-led system of political and military alliances, especially in the two critical regions of Europe and East Asia, has presented China and Russia with what Dean Acheson once referred to as "situations of strength" that have required them to pursue their ambitions cautiously and, since the end of the Cold War, to defer serious efforts to disrupt the international system.

During the era of American primacy, China and Russia have participated in and for the most part been beneficiaries of the open international economic system the United States created and helps sustain; so long as that system functions, they have had more to gain by playing in it than by challenging and overturning it.

The system has checked their ambitions in both positive and negative ways. During the era of American primacy, China and Russia have participated in and for the most part been beneficiaries of the open international economic system the United States created and helps sustain; so long as that system functions, they have had more to gain by playing in it than by challenging and overturning it. The political and strategic aspects of the order, however, have worked to their detriment. The growth and vibrancy of democratic government in the two decades following the collapse of Soviet communism posed a continual threat to the ability of rulers in Beijing and Moscow to maintain control, and since the end of the Cold War they have regarded every advance of democratic institutions — especially the geographical advance of liberal democracies close to their borders — as an existential threat. That's for good reason: Autocratic powers since the days of Klemens von Metternich have always feared the

contagion of liberalism. The mere existence of democracies on their borders, the global free flow of information they cannot control, the dangerous connection between free market capitalism and political freedom — all pose a threat to rulers who depend on keeping restive forces in their own countries in check. The continual challenge to the legitimacy of their rule posed by the U.S.-supported democratic order has therefore naturally made them hostile both to that order and to the United States. But, until recently, a preponderance of domestic and international forces has dissuaded them from confronting the order directly. Chinese rulers have had to worry about what an unsuccessful confrontation with the United States might do to their legitimacy at home. Even Putin has pushed only against open doors, as in Syria, where the United States responded passively to his probes. He has been more cautious when confronted by even marginal U.S. and European opposition, as in Ukraine.

The greatest check on Chinese and Russian ambitions has been the military and economic power of the United States and its allies in Europe and Asia. China, although increasingly powerful, has had to contemplate facing the combined military and economic strength of the world's superpower and some very formidable regional powers linked by alliance or common strategic interest — including Japan, India, and South Korea, as well as smaller but still potent nations like Vietnam and Australia. Russia has had to face the United States and its NATO allies. When united, these U.S.-led alliances present a daunting challenge to a revisionist power that can call on few allies of its own for assistance. Even were the Chinese to score an early victory in a conflict, such as the military subjection of Taiwan or a naval battle in the South or East China Sea, they would have to contend over time with the combined industrial productive capacities of some of the world's richest and most technologically advanced nations and the likely cutoff of access to foreign markets on which their own economy depends. A weaker Russia, with its depleted population and oil- and gas-dependent economy, would face an even greater challenge.

For decades, the strong global position enjoyed by the United States and its allies has discouraged any serious challenge. So long as the United States was perceived as a dependable ally, Chinese and Russian leaders feared that aggressive moves would backfire and possibly bring their regimes down. This is what the political scientist William Wohlforth once described as the inherent stability of the unipolar order: As dissatisfied regional powers sought to challenge the status quo, their alarmed neighbors turned to the distant American superpower to contain their ambitions. And it worked. The United States stepped up, and Russia and China largely backed down — or were preempted before acting at all.

Faced with these obstacles, the best option for the two revisionist great powers has always been to hope for or, if possible, engineer a weakening of the U.S.-supported world order from within, either by separating the United States from its allies or by raising doubts about the U.S. commitment and thereby encouraging would-be allies and partners to forgo the strategic protection of the liberal world order and seek accommodation with its challengers.

The present system has therefore depended not only on American power but on coherence and unity at the heart of the democratic world. The United States has had to play its part as the principal guarantor of the order, especially in the military and strategic realm, but the order's ideological and economic core — the democracies of Europe and East Asia and the Pacific — has also had to remain relatively healthy and confident.

In recent years, both pillars have been shaken. The democratic order has weakened and fractured at its core. Difficult economic conditions, the recrudescence of nationalism and tribalism, weak and uncertain political leadership and unresponsive mainstream political parties, and a new era of communications that seems to strengthen rather than weaken tribalism have together produced a crisis of confidence not only in the democracies but in what might be called the liberal enlightenment project. That project elevated universal principles of individual rights and common humanity over ethnic, racial, religious, national, or tribal differences. It looked to a growing economic interdependence to create common interests across boundaries and to the establishment of international institutions to smooth

differences and facilitate cooperation among nations. Instead, the past decade has seen the rise of tribalism and nationalism, an increasing focus on the Other in all societies, and a loss of confidence in government, in the capitalist system, and in democracy. We are witnessing the opposite of Francis Fukuyama's "end of history." History is returning with a vengeance and with it all the darker aspects of the human soul, including, for many, the perennial human yearning for a strong leader to provide firm guidance in a time of confusion and incoherence.

### The Dark Ages 2.0

This crisis of the enlightenment project may have been inevitable, a recurring phenomenon produced by inherent flaws in both capitalism and democracy. In the 1930s, economic crisis and rising nationalism led many to doubt whether either democracy or capitalism was preferable to alternatives such as fascism and communism. And it is no coincidence that the crisis of confidence in liberalism accompanied a simultaneous breakdown of the strategic order. Then, the question was whether the United States as the outside power would step in and save or remake an order that Britain and France were no longer able or willing to sustain. Now, the question is whether the United States is willing to continue upholding the order that it created and which depends entirely on American power or whether Americans are prepared to take the risk — if they even understand the risk — of letting the order collapse into chaos and conflict.

That willingness has been in doubt for some time, well before the election of Trump and even before the election of Barack Obama. Increasingly in the quarter century after the end of the Cold War, Americans have been wondering why they bear such an unusual and outsized responsibility for preserving global order when their own interests are not always clearly served — and when the United States seems to be making all the sacrifices while others benefit. Few remember the reasons why the United States took on this abnormal role after the calamitous two world wars of the 20th century. The millennial generation born after the end of the Cold War can hardly be expected to understand the lasting significance of the political, economic, and security structures established after World War II. Nor are they likely to learn much about it in high school and college textbooks obsessed with noting the evils and follies of American "imperialism." Both the crises of the first half of the 20th century and its solution in 1945 have been forgotten. As a consequence, the American public's patience with the difficulties and costs inherent in playing that global role have worn thin. Whereas previous unsuccessful and costly wars, in Korea in 1950 and Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, and previous economic downturns, such as with the energy crisis and crippling "stagflation" of the mid- to late 1970s, did not have the effect of turning Americans against global involvement, the unsuccessful wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the financial crisis of 2008 have.

The Obama administration responded to the George W. Bush administration's failures in Iraq and Afghanistan not by restoring American power and influence but by further reducing them.

Obama pursued an ambivalent approach to global involvement, but his core strategy was retrenchment. In his actions and his statements, he critiqued and repudiated previous American strategy and reinforced a national mood favoring a much less active role in the world and much narrower definition of American interests. The Obama administration responded to the George W. Bush administration's failures in Iraq and Afghanistan not by restoring American power and influence but by further reducing them. Although the administration promised to "rebalance" American foreign policy to Asia and the Pacific, in practice that meant reducing global commitments and accommodating revisionist powers at the expense of allies' security.

The administration's early attempt to "reset" relations with Russia struck the first blow to America's reputation as a reliable ally. Coming just after the Russian invasion of Georgia, it appeared to reward Moscow's aggression. The reset also came at the expense of U.S. allies in Central Europe, as programs of military cooperation with Poland and the Czech Republic were jettisoned to appease the Kremlin. This attempt at accommodation, moreover, came just as Russian policy toward the West — not to mention Putin's repressive policies toward his own people — was hardening. Far from eliciting

better behavior by Russia, the reset emboldened Putin to push harder. Then, in 2014, the West's inadequate response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and seizure of Crimea, though better than the Bush administration's anemic response to the invasion of Georgia (Europe and the United States at least imposed sanctions after the invasion of Ukraine), still indicated reluctance on the part of the U.S. administration to force Russia back in its declared sphere of interest. Obama, in fact, publicly acknowledged Russia's privileged position in Ukraine even as the United States and Europe sought to protect that country's sovereignty. In Syria, the administration practically invited Russian intervention through Washington's passivity, and certainly did nothing to discourage it, thus reinforcing the growing impression of an America in retreat across the Middle East (an impression initially created by the unnecessary and unwise withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Iraq). Subsequent Russian actions that increased the refugee flow from Syria into Europe also brought no American response, despite the evident damage of those refugee flows to European democratic institutions. The signal sent by the Obama administration was that none of this was really America's problem.

In East Asia, the Obama administration undermined its otherwise commendable efforts to assert America's continuing interest and influence. The so-called "pivot" proved to be mostly rhetoric. Inadequate overall defense spending precluded the necessary increases in America's regional military presence in a meaningful way, and the administration allowed a critical economic component, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, to die in Congress, chiefly a victim of its own party's opposition. The pivot also suffered from the general perception of American retreat and retrenchment, encouraged both by presidential rhetoric and by administration policies, especially in the Middle East. The premature, unnecessary, and strategically costly withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, followed by the accommodating agreement with Iran on its nuclear program, and then by the failure to hold the line on threats to use force against Syria's president, was noticed around the world. Despite the Obama administration's insistence that American strategy should be geared toward Asia, U.S. allies have been left wondering how reliable the U.S. commitment might be when facing the challenge posed by China. The Obama administration erred in imagining that it could retrench globally while reassuring allies in Asia that the United States remained a reliable partner.

#### **Nature abhors a vacuum**

The effect on the two great revisionist powers, meanwhile, has been to encourage greater efforts at revision. In recent years, both powers have been more active in challenging the order, and one reason has been the growing perception that the United States is losing both the will and the capacity to sustain it. The psychological and political effect of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in the United States, which has been to weaken support for American global engagement across the board, has provided an opening.

It is a myth, prevalent among liberal democracies, that revisionist powers can be pacified by acquiescence to their demands. American retrenchment, by this logic, ought to reduce tensions and competition. Unfortunately, the opposite is more often the case. The more secure revisionist powers feel, the more ambitious they are in seeking to change the system to their advantage because the resistance to change appears to be lessening. Just look at both China and Russia: Never in the past two centuries have they enjoyed greater security from external attack than they do today. Yet both remain dissatisfied and have become increasingly aggressive in pressing what they perceive to be their growing advantage in a system where the United States no longer puts up as much resistance as it used to.

The two great powers have differed, so far, chiefly in their methods. China has until now been the more careful, cautious, and patient of the two, seeking influence primarily through its great economic clout and using its growing military power chiefly as a source of deterrence and regional intimidation. It has not resorted to the outright use of force yet, although its actions in the South China Sea are military in nature, with strategic objectives. And while Beijing has been wary of using military force until now, it would be a mistake to assume it will continue show such restraint in the future — possibly the near future. Revisionist great powers with growing military capabilities invariably make use of those

capabilities when they believe the possible gains outweigh the risks and costs. If the Chinese perceive America's commitment to its allies and its position in the region to be weakening, or its capacity to make good on those commitments to be declining, then they will be more inclined to attempt to use the power they are acquiring in order to achieve their objectives. As the trend lines draw closer, this is where the first crisis is likely to take place.

Russia has been far more aggressive. It has invaded two neighboring states — Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 — and in both cases hived off significant portions of those two nations' sovereign territory. Given the intensity with which the United States and its allies would have responded to such actions during the four decades of the Cold War, their relative lack of a response must have sent quite a signal to the Kremlin — and to others around the world. Moscow then followed by sending substantial forces into Syria. It has used its dominance of European energy markets as a weapon. It has used cyberwarfare against neighboring states. It has engaged in extensive information warfare on a global scale.

More recently, the Russian government has deployed a weapon that the Chinese either lack or have so far chosen not to deploy — the ability to interfere directly in Western electoral processes, both to influence their outcomes and more generally to discredit the democratic system. Russia funds right-wing populist parties across Europe, including in France; uses its media outlets to support favored candidates and attack others; has disseminated “fake news” to influence voters, most recently in Italy's referendum; and has hacked private communications in order to embarrass those it wishes to defeat. This past year, Russia for the first time employed this powerful weapon against the United States, heavily interfering in the American electoral process.

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Although Russia, by any measure, is the weaker of the two great powers, it has so far had more success than China in accomplishing its objective of dividing and disrupting the West. Its interference in Western democratic political systems, its information warfare, and its role in creating increased refugee flows from Syria into Europe have all contributed to the sapping of Europeans' confidence in their political systems and established political parties. Its military intervention in Syria, contrasted with American passivity, has exacerbated existing doubts about American staying power in the region. Beijing, until recently, has succeeded mostly in driving American allies closer to the United States out of concern for growing Chinese power — but that could change quickly, especially if the United States continues on its present trajectory. There are signs that regional powers are already recalculating: East Asian countries are contemplating regional trade agreements that need not include the United States or, in the case of the Philippines, are actively courting China, while a number of nations in Eastern and Central Europe are moving closer to Russia, both strategically and ideologically. We could soon face a situation where both great revisionist powers are acting aggressively, including by military means, posing extreme challenges to American and global security in two regions at once.

### **The dispensable nation**

All this comes as Americans continue to signal their reluctance to uphold the world order they created after World War II. Donald Trump was not the only major political figure in this past election season to call for a much narrower definition of American interests and a lessening of the burdens of American global leadership. President Obama and Bernie Sanders both expressed a version of “America First.” The candidate who spoke often of America's “indispensable” global role lost, and even Hillary Clinton felt compelled to jettison her earlier support for the Trans-Pacific Partnership. At the very least, there should be doubts about the American public's willingness to continue supporting the international alliance structure, denying the revisionist powers their desired spheres of influence and regional hegemony, and upholding democratic and free market norms in the international system.

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Coming as it does at a time of growing great-power competition, this narrowing definition of American interests will likely hasten a return to the instability and clashes of previous eras. The weakness at the core of the democratic world and the shedding by the United States of global responsibilities have already encouraged a more aggressive revisionism by the dissatisfied powers. That, in turn, has further sapped the democratic world's confidence and willingness to resist. History suggests that this is a downward spiral from which it will be difficult to recover, absent a rather dramatic shift of course by the United States.

That shift may come too late. It was in the 1920s, not the 1930s, that the democratic powers made the most important and ultimately fatal decisions. Americans' disillusionment after World War I led them to reject playing a strategic role in preserving the peace in Europe and Asia, even though America was the only nation powerful enough to play that role. The withdrawal of the United States helped undermine the will of Britain and France and encouraged Germany in Europe and Japan in Asia to take increasingly aggressive actions to achieve regional dominance. Most Americans were convinced that nothing that happened in Europe or Asia could affect their security. It took World War II to convince them that was a mistake. The "return to normalcy" of the 1920 election seemed safe and innocent at the time, but the essentially selfish policies pursued by the world's strongest power in the following decade helped set the stage for the calamities of the 1930s. By the time the crises began to erupt, it was already too late to avoid paying the high price of global conflict.

In such times, it has always been tempting to believe that geopolitical competition can be solved through efforts at cooperation and accommodation. The idea, recently proposed by Niall Ferguson, that the world can be ruled jointly by the United States, Russia, and China is not a new one. Such condominiums have been proposed and attempted in every era when the dominant power or powers in the international system sought to fend off challenges from the dissatisfied revisionist powers. It has rarely worked. Revisionist great powers are not easy to satisfy short of complete capitulation. Their sphere of influence is never quite large enough to satisfy their pride or their expanding need for security. In fact, their very expansion creates insecurity, by frightening neighbors and leading them to band together against the rising power. The satiated power that Otto von Bismarck spoke of is rare. The German leaders who succeeded him were not satisfied even with being the strongest power in Europe. In their efforts to grow still stronger, they produced coalitions against them, making their fear of "encirclement" a self-fulfilling prophecy.

#### **Give 'em an inch, they'll take a mile**

This is a common trait of rising powers — their actions produce the very insecurity they claim to want to redress. They harbor grievances against the existing order (both Germany and Japan considered themselves the "have-not" nations), but their grievances cannot be satisfied so long as the existing order remains in place. Marginal concession is not enough, but the powers upholding the existing order will not make more than marginal concessions unless they are compelled to by superior strength. Japan, the aggrieved "have-not" nation of the 1930s, did not satisfy itself by taking Manchuria in 1931. Germany, the aggrieved victim of Versailles, did not satisfy itself by bringing the Germans of the Sudetenland back into the fold. They demanded much more, and they could not persuade the democratic powers to give them what they wanted without resorting to war.

Granting the revisionist powers spheres of influence is not a recipe for peace and tranquility but rather an invitation to inevitable conflict.

Granting the revisionist powers spheres of influence is not a recipe for peace and tranquility but rather an invitation to inevitable conflict. Russia's historical sphere of influence does not end in Ukraine. It begins in Ukraine. It extends to the Baltic States, to the Balkans, and to the heart of Central Europe. And within Russia's traditional sphere of influence, other nations do not enjoy autonomy or even

sovereignty. There was no independent Poland under the Russian Empire nor under the Soviet Union. For China to gain its desired sphere of influence in East Asia will mean that, when it chooses, it can close the region off to the United States — not only militarily but politically and economically, too.

China will, of course, inevitably exercise great sway in its own region, as will Russia. The United States cannot and should not prevent China from being an economic powerhouse. Nor should it wish for the collapse of Russia. The United States should even welcome competition of a certain kind. Great powers compete across multiple planes — economic, ideological, and political, as well as military. Competition in most spheres is necessary and even healthy. Within the liberal order, China can compete economically and successfully with the United States; Russia can thrive in the international economic order upheld by the democratic system, even if it is not itself democratic.

But military and strategic competition is different. The security situation undergirds everything else. It remains true today as it has since World War II that only the United States has the capacity and the unique geographical advantages to provide global security and relative stability. There is no stable balance of power in Europe or Asia without the United States. And while we can talk about “soft power” and “smart power,” they have been and always will be of limited value when confronting raw military power. Despite all of the loose talk of American decline, it is in the military realm where U.S. advantages remain clearest. Even in other great powers’ backyards, the United States retains the capacity, along with its powerful allies, to deter challenges to the security order. But without a U.S. willingness to maintain the balance in far-flung regions of the world, the system will buckle under the unrestrained military competition of regional powers. Part of that willingness entails defense spending commensurate with America’s continuing global role.

For the United States to accept a return to spheres of influence would not calm the international waters. It would merely return the world to the condition it was in at the end of the 19th century, with competing great powers clashing over inevitably intersecting and overlapping spheres. These unsettled, disordered conditions produced the fertile ground for the two destructive world wars of the first half of the 20th century. The collapse of the British-dominated world order on the oceans, the disruption of the uneasy balance of power on the European continent as a powerful unified Germany took shape, and the rise of Japanese power in East Asia all contributed to a highly competitive international environment in which dissatisfied great powers took the opportunity to pursue their ambitions in the absence of any power or group of powers to unite in checking them. The result was an unprecedented global calamity and death on an epic scale. It has been the great accomplishment of the U.S.-led world order in the 70 years since the end of World War II that this kind of competition has been held in check and great power conflicts have been avoided. It will be more than a shame if Americans were to destroy what they created — and not because it was no longer possible to sustain but simply because they chose to stop trying.