

# **Foreign Affairs**

## **The Return of Pax Americana? Putin's War Is Fortifying the Democratic Alliance By Michael Beckley and Hal Brands March 14, 2022**

The United States and its allies have failed to prevent Russia from brutalizing Ukraine, but they can still win the larger struggle to save the international order. Russia's savage invasion has exposed the gap between Western countries' soaring liberal aspirations and the paltry resources they have devoted to defend them. The United States has declared great-power competition on Moscow and Beijing but has so far failed to summon the money, the creativity, or the urgency necessary to prevail in those rivalries. Yet Russian President Vladimir Putin has now inadvertently done the United States and its allies a tremendous favor. In shocking them out of their complacency, he has given them a historic opportunity to regroup and reload for an era of intense competition—not just with Russia but also with China—and, ultimately, to rebuild an international order that just recently looked to be headed for collapse.

This isn't fantasy: it has happened before. In the late 1940s, the West was entering a previous period of great-power competition but had not made the investments or initiatives needed to win it. U.S. defense spending was pathetically inadequate, NATO existed only on paper, and neither Japan nor West Germany had been reintegrated into the free world. The Communist bloc seemed to have the momentum. Then, in June 1950, an instance of unprovoked authoritarian aggression—the Korean War—revolutionized Western politics and laid the foundation for a successful containment strategy. The policies that won the Cold War and thereby made the modern liberal international order were products of an unexpected hot war. The catastrophe in Ukraine could play a similar role today.

Putin's aggression has created a window of strategic opportunity for Washington and its allies. The democracies must now undertake a major

multilateral rearmament program and erect firmer defenses—military and otherwise—against the coming wave of autocratic aggression. They must exploit the current crisis to weaken the autocrats’ capacity for coercion and subversion and deepen the economic and diplomatic cooperation among liberal states around the globe. The invasion of Ukraine signals a new phase in an intensifying struggle to shape the international order. The democratic world won’t have a better chance to position itself for success.

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### **Shock Therapy**

The United States has been talking tough about great-power competition for years. But to counter authoritarian rivals, a country needs more than self-righteous rhetoric. It also requires massive investments in military forces geared for high-intensity combat, sustained diplomacy to enlist and retain allies, and a willingness to confront adversaries and even risk war. Such commitments do not come naturally, especially to democracies that believe that peace is the norm. That is why ambitious competitive strategies usually sit on the shelf until a shocking event compels collective sacrifice.

Take containment. Now considered one of the most successful strategies in U.S. diplomatic history, containment was on the verge of failure before the Korean War broke out. During the late 1940s, the United States had undertaken a dangerous, long-term competition against a mighty authoritarian rival. U.S. officials had established maximalist objectives: the containment of Soviet power until that regime collapsed or mellowed and, in the words of President Harry Truman, support for “peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation.” Truman had begun to implement landmark policies such as the Marshall Plan to rebuild Western Europe and the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty. Yet before June 1950, containment remained more of an aspiration than a strategy.

Even as Cold War crises broke out in Berlin, Czechoslovakia, Iran, and Turkey, U.S. military spending plummeted from \$83 billion at the end of World War II to \$9 billion in 1948. The North Atlantic Treaty was new and

feeble: the alliance lacked an integrated military command or anything approaching the forces it needed to defend Western Europe. Resource constraints forced Washington to write off China during its civil war, effectively standing aside as Mao Zedong's Communists defeated Chiang Kai-Shek's Nationalist government, and to draw a defense perimeter that initially excluded South Korea and Taiwan. U.S. statecraft combined sky-high ambitions with a bargain-basement approach to achieving them.

The reasons for this shortfall will sound familiar. U.S. officials hoped that the United States' overall military superiority—especially its atomic monopoly—would compensate for weaknesses everywhere along the East-West divide. They found it hard to believe that even ruthless, totalitarian enemies might resort to war. In Washington, moreover, global visions competed with domestic priorities, such as taming inflation and balancing the budget. U.S. officials also planned to economize by splitting the country's rivals—specifically, wooing Chinese leader Mao Zedong's communists once they won China's civil war and pulling that country away from the Soviet Union.

That policy failed: Mao sealed an alliance with Moscow in early 1950. Just months before, another strategic setback—the first Soviet nuclear test—had ended the United States' atomic monopoly. Yet even then, Truman was unmoved. When Paul Nitze, the director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, crafted his famous memo, NSC-68, calling for a global diplomatic offensive supported by a massive military buildup, Truman politely ignored the paper and announced plans to cut the defense budget.

It took a brazen international land grab to shake Washington out of its torpor. North Korean Premier Kim Il Sung's assault on South Korea, undertaken in collusion with Mao and the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, changed everything. The invasion convinced U.S. policymakers that the dictators were on the march and the danger of global conflict was growing. The conflict also dispelled any hope of dividing Moscow and Beijing: Washington now faced a communist monolith applying pressure all around the Eurasian periphery. In short, the North Korean invasion made the Truman administration fear that the postwar world was hanging in the balance.

U.S. policymakers decided not just to defend South Korea but to mount a global campaign to strengthen the noncommunist world. The North Atlantic Treaty became the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, with a unified command structure and 25 active divisions at its disposal. The Truman administration dispatched additional forces to Europe, where U.S. allies accelerated their military preparations and agreed, in principle, to rearm West Germany. In the Asia-Pacific, the United States created a cordon of security pacts involving Australia and New Zealand, Japan, and the Philippines and deployed naval forces to prevent a Chinese takeover of Taiwan.

The Korean War thus turbocharged the emergence of the global network of alliances and the enduring military deployments that constituted the backbone of containment. It precipitated the revival and rearmament of former enemies, Japan and West Germany, as core members of the free world. Underpinning all this was an enormous military buildup meant to make Soviet aggression unthinkable. U.S. defense spending more than tripled, reaching 14 percent of GDP in 1953; the U.S. nuclear arsenal and conventional forces more than doubled. “The Soviets respected nothing but force,” said Truman. “To build such force . . . is precisely what we are attempting to do now.”

To be sure, the Korean War also showed the danger of going too far. The Truman administration erred spectacularly in trying to reunify the Korean Peninsula by force in late 1950, which provoked communist Chinese intervention and a longer, costlier war. The idea that a setback anywhere could lead to disaster everywhere prefigured the so-called domino theory and the United States’ tragic intervention in Vietnam. Sky-high, wartime defense spending eventually proved too onerous to be sustained. But overall, the Truman administration’s reaction to the Korean War was vital in stabilizing a fragile world and creating the situations of strength that allowed the West to triumph in the Cold War.

## History Rhymes

The war in Ukraine differs in many ways from the Korean War, not least because U.S. troops aren't directly involved. The Russia and China of the 2020s are not the Soviet Union and Maoist China of the 1950s, even if Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping have taken on distinctly Stalinist tendencies of late.

Yet history certainly seems to be rhyming today. In the late 2010s, as in the late 1940s, Washington and its allies perceived growing threats but were struggling to contain them. To their credit, the Trump and Biden administrations identified great-power competition as the United States' strategic priority. NATO deployed several thousand additional troops to eastern Europe after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014, and new coalitions started forming in the Indo-Pacific region to check Chinese power. Until the current war in Ukraine, however, balancing against Russia and China was often lackadaisical.

After plunging for most of the 2010s, defense spending across the democratic world started to rise—and modestly at that—only around 2018. Due to inflation, U.S. military spending actually declined six percent in real terms in 2021. This reflected prevailing public apathy: Americans questioned why the United States should defend far-flung friends such as the Baltic states and Taiwan; for their part, many voters in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom believed that their countries should remain neutral in the U.S.-Chinese cold war.

The decline in defense funding was compounded by a lack of strategic seriousness. The Trump and Biden administrations saddled the U.S. military with extraneous missions, including combating election fraud, illegal immigration, climate change, and pandemics. Western European militaries spent meager budget increases on pay raises and pensions. In East Asia, U.S. allies devoted defense dollars to missions that had nothing to do with containing China, such as conducting counterinsurgency in the Philippines or acquiring vulnerable prestige platforms. Nearly a quarter of Taiwan's 2021 defense budget was earmarked for fancy warships and fighter aircraft that may not make it out of their bases in a war.

Defense wasn't the only area in which decisive rhetoric accompanied desultory policy. The Trump and Biden administrations talked about China as a century-defining challenge and then refused to back the single best initiative for countering Chinese economic influence: the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a massive free-trade deal originally negotiated by the United States and 12 Pacific Rim economies. Europe, meanwhile, was deepening its dependence on Russian gas. There were creative, energetic policies, such as the use of sanctions on technology to derail Huawei's push for dominance of the world's 5G networks, but nothing like the across-the-board urgency one might expect in a fight over the fate of the world order.

This strategic lethargy had many causes—economic hangovers from the Great Recession and the eurozone crisis, the legacy of grinding wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the impact of surging populism all took their toll. In the United States and across Europe, voters pushed governments to focus on nation building at home rather than competition abroad. Fundamentally, however, democratic societies that had grown complacent amid the great-power peace of the post-Cold War era struggled to comprehend just how grave the danger of major war had become.

Democratic populations believed that globalization had rendered old-fashioned conquest and imperialism obsolete. They assumed that Putin and Xi were savvy, cautious leaders pursuing limited objectives—staying in power, maximizing economic growth, and gaining a greater say within the existing order. Russian and Chinese paramilitary forces might engage in “gray zone” operations below the threshold of war. But if push came to shove, Moscow and Beijing would cut deals and de-escalate crises. And if they started acting more aggressively, there would be time for the West to pull itself together. Until then, the United States and its allies could focus on getting their own houses in order and squabbling among themselves.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine shattered these comfortable myths. Suddenly, great-power war looks not only possible but perhaps probable. Western policymakers have rediscovered the value of hard power and have started taking Putin's and Xi's imperial aspirations literally. The idea that the United States can focus on China while pursuing “stable and predictable” ties with

Russia has become laughable: the Chinese-Russian entente could violently challenge the balance of power at both ends of Eurasia simultaneously. As a result, moves previously thought impossible—accelerated German and Japanese rearmament, EU arms transfers to Ukraine, the near-total economic isolation of a major power—are well underway.

This flurry of activity came too late to spare Ukraine from Putin's aggression. But it may have arrived just in time to consolidate a global alliance that unites democracies against Russia and China and thereby secures the free world for a generation to come. To make the most of this critical moment, the United States and its allies should heed three key lessons from the Korean War.

### **A Call to Arms**

First, think big. Truman didn't limit his response to North Korean aggression to the Korean Peninsula or even to Asia. Rather, he sought to fortify the larger free world. Today, Russian aggression has created similar possibilities by sharpening divisions between democracies that support the liberal order and powerful authoritarians trying to destroy it. Nearly eight out of ten U.S. residents view the Ukraine crisis as part of a broader fight for global democracy. In the short term, the crisis in Europe may pull U.S. attention away from the Indo-Pacific. In the long-term, however, Washington and its allies can use an outrage hatched by Moscow to get tougher with Beijing. Indeed, the United States' overarching goal should be to build a transregional coalition of democracies that can confront Russia and China with a basic proposition: local aggression will trigger a swift and devastating global response.

Second, move fast. Truman knew that moments of allied solidarity and domestic unity could be fleeting, so his administration rushed to get a full-fledged containment strategy up and running in a matter of months. "By 1951," the political scientist Robert Jervis observed, "all the elements we have come to associate with the cold war were present or in train." Today, the United States and its allies should build on the coalition that has formed to handle the Ukraine crisis and be ready to redeploy it against China.

For example, the partnerships that severed Russia's access to the global financial system and key technologies could serve as a model for similar sanctions against China if it invades Taiwan. The ongoing efforts to slash European reliance on Russian energy should be expanded into a broader push to decouple free-world economies from Russia and China in critical areas, including advanced technologies, rare earths, and emergency medical supplies. Creating overlapping technology coalitions in which democracies pool money and resources to race ahead in key areas, such as semiconductors or artificial intelligence, while denying critical inputs and capital to autocracies, will be critical. The centerpiece of this approach would be a U.S. move to rejoin the TPP (now called the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, or CPTPP)—perhaps the best example of an initiative whose strategic value is incontestable and whose political costs should fall as the price of complacency rises. If the democracies don't waste the moment, then a lasting result of the Ukraine crisis could be a tighter free-world economic bloc that makes it harder for autocratic regimes to coerce or seduce.

Economic power goes only so far, however, so the democratic world also needs a rapid multilateral rearmament program to shore up a military balance that has been eroding in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. This will include enhanced forward deployments of well-armed forces—especially armor and airpower in eastern Europe and a thicket of shooters and sensors in the western Pacific—that can turn attempted land grabs into protracted, bloody quagmires. A rapid ramping up of detailed operational planning on how the United States and key allies, such as Australia and Japan, would respond to Chinese aggression is also necessary. The United States and its major allies should also allow for arms transfers to potential frontline states, such as Poland and Taiwan, conditional on them committing to major increases in defense spending and adopting military strategies suited to buying time for a larger multilateral response.

All this will require the sort of money that democracies struggle to find in times of peace but don't hesitate to spend under the threat of war. The United States should plan on spending roughly five percent of GDP on defense over the coming decade (compared with roughly 3.2 percent today), to allow it to respond to aggression in one theater without leaving



itself naked in others. Key allies on both sides of Eurasia should commit to similar proportional increases.

But if the United States and its allies must move fast, a final lesson is that they must avoid going too far. The escalation of the Korean conflict, and the embrace of a version of containment that knew no geographic bounds, led to overextension and tragedy. There is a thin line between urgency and recklessness.

Washington should thus eschew direct military intervention in Ukraine. It should ignore impassioned calls to pursue regime change in Russia or China—an objective the democratic world lacks the power to achieve at a cost it can tolerate. The United States must also remain selective about where it competes most vigorously with Moscow and Beijing: eastern Europe and East Asia matter tremendously, whereas parts of Central Asia and Africa do not. Above all, the United States and its allies must remain patient. Truman acknowledged, in 1953, that the Cold War wouldn't end anytime soon, but he argued that "we have set the course that we can win it." That's a reasonable standard for U.S. policy in the early 2020s.

Even an economically devastated, militarily constrained Russia will retain the ability to make geopolitical trouble. China will be a formidable rival for decades, even if it is prevented from overturning the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific and beyond. The free-world offensive during the Korean War was an emergency program, but it created enduring strategic advantages that largely determined the Cold War's outcome. The Ukraine crisis can have a similar effect in another long twilight struggle if it motivates the United States and its allies to get serious about defending the world order that has served them so well.

MICHAEL BECKLEY is Associate Professor of Political Science at Tufts University, a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, and the author of *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower*.

HAL BRANDS is Henry A. Kissinger Distinguished Professor of Global Affairs at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, a Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, and the author of *The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us About Great-Power Rivalry Today*.