

US National Security and Great Power Conflict: Will Deterrence Hold?

Dr. Andrew A. Michta

Senior Fellow, Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security

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A thought for today

“The parties advocate for the creation of a new type of relationships among global powers, founded on mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and cooperation that benefits all involved. They assert that the new inter-State dynamics between Russia and China surpass the political and military alliances from the Cold War period. **The friendship between these two nations knows no bounds, and there are no "forbidden" areas for collaboration.** The enhancement of their strategic cooperation is not directed against third nations and remains unaffected by fluctuations in the international landscape or changes in third countries.”

*Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on
the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development*
February 4, 2022

Outline

- The nature of US power and current threat levels (key theaters).
- How did we get here (the last three decades)?
- Deterrence – our score card as of 2025.
- US power and military capabilities today.
- Conclusion: Can regional balances hold, or are we tracking for a system-transforming war?

Shifting Concepts of Security and Residual Assumptions

- We are in a period of protracted systemic instability (regional balances are at risk).
- States, not armies go to war.
- State sovereignty rests on security (the irreducible function of the state).
- Security always involves power and ultimately the threat of force.
- Self-help and/or pooling of resources (alliances/partnerships).
- Institutional arrangements contribute to security but aren't enough.
- Economic strength is the irreducible foundation of security
- National cohesion, strength of political institutions and social networks are all vital (resilience)

The Hierarchy of National Interests

- **Vital (to die for)**
 - If unfulfilled, will have immediate consequences for core interests of survival and freedom
- **Important (to fight/kill for)**
 - If unfulfilled, will result in damage that may eventually affect vital/irreducible national interests
- **Peripheral (to pay for/or walk away)**
 - If unfilled, will result in damage that is unlikely to affect core national interests



America and the World

The Nature of US Power

- We are a quintessentially naval power (maritime domain).
- A residual isolationist impulse.
- The rationale for WWI, WWII and the Cold War (Eurasia).
- The formula for containment (NATO; limited war; economic, military and ideological competition).
- The dangers attendant to US victory in 1990/1991 (ideological validation).
- Historical parallels today to the 1930s (will regional balances hold?).

Post-Cold War Misdiagnosis

- Ideological certitude post-1991.
- Export-driven modernization theories (globalization)
- Democratic peace theory
- Institutions vs. culture
- The rise of transnationalists (the bi-coastal corridors vs. the heartland).
- The industrialization of China enabled by US and European policies.
- The shock of 9/11 and the shift to secondary theaters.
- GWOT/OCO, Georgia 2008, Ukraine 2014, Syria 2015, Ukraine 2022, and....?

What is Deterrence (A Working Definition)

- It rests on credibly targeting something the other is desperate to preserve.
- It rests on real demonstrated capabilities.
- It rests on real demonstrated will to use those capabilities if the line is crossed.

Deterrence Failures (Past Four Years)

- Russia invades Ukraine the second time.
- Russia engages in persistent violations of NATO air space by Russia (the Black Sea locked up; Romania effectively unable to control its costal waters).
- Hamas attacks Israel, the closest US ally in the Middle East.
- Iran launches direct air and missile attacks against Israel.
- Russia destroys underwater cables in the Baltic.
- China supports Russia economically and supplies dual-use systems and weapons components to Russia.

The “Axis of Dictatorships” and Threat Level

- Russia: revisionist/chronic (neo-imperial; predominantly regional in multiple theaters).
- China: existential/enduring (hegemonic-both regional and global in nature).
- Iran: periodic/acute (regional enabler-ideology and geopolitics)
- North Korea: enduring/systemic (regional enabler—ideology and geopolitics).

US Economic Vulnerabilities

- Offshoring and the attendant loss of manufacturing base, with dependence on China across multiple supply chains.
- R&D and IP bleed (slower but continuing).
- Acute gaps: ship-building; core sectors needed should we go to war.
- Cutting edge research – underinvestment and late-to-the game.
- National debt at approximately \$37 trillion and counting.
- Slow but progressing de-dollarization of international transactions.
- Access to critical minerals.
- Skillset gap.

US Military and DIB Vulnerabilities

- NDAA authorized Joint Force strength at only 1.3 million (persistent recruitment shortfalls).
- Defense spending as percentage of GDP: 3.1% (more like 2.7% when factoring inflation and systems acquisition costs).
- The military structured to fight in one major theater, one secondary; we are challenged in both the Atlantic and the Pacific, plus MENA and the Korean Peninsula.
- US defense industrial base: Only five major defense and space contractors left (capacity shortfalls).
- An unsustainable model for what weapons and munitions we buy for the military.

Conclusion: Can We Make Deterrence Hold?

- Historical precedent: Appeasement triggers large-scale conflict.
- The nature of US strategic debate (“pivot to the Indo-Pacific”).
- Inadequate defense spending (Senator Wicker: 5% of GDP minimum; a “generational investment in defense” urgently needed).
- Ukraine is the defining conflict that will shape the global security-landscape.
- Are we already in Phase Zero of the global conflict?
- Can we sort through our legacy alliances and international institutions to make them work again?
- Can we mobilize the American people (leadership)?

Questions?