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## *Issue Brief*

# Will Great-Power Conflict Return?

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April 06, 2018

## **S***ummary*

Great power conflict is back on the global agenda. Three recent US government documents – National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy and Nuclear Posture Review — prioritise great power competition over other strategic interests and threats. With worldviews that stand in contradiction to that of the US, China and Russia are also flexing their muscles. This geopolitical competition with or without direct conflict will lead to a situation where productive cooperation among great powers on critical international issues is likely to prove difficult.

Great power conflict is becoming a reality on the global agenda, once again. For the past nearly three decades, the primary focus of the global strategic community was on small wars, counter-terrorism, and climate change, poverty, pandemics and transnational organized crime. Further, during these years, there was optimism that globalization and interdependence could bring about political and economic transformation inducing global peace and stability. The post-Cold War world with the United States as the superpower, a weak Russia, and rising China did not witness the intense geopolitical struggles of the earlier generations. The realigned blocs and alliances and growth of regional organizations across the globe also limited the possibilities of such conflict.

But developments in the past couple of years herald a new era of high politics. The relative decline of the US, the rise of China as America's leading competitor, the re-emergence of Russia and its desire for greater role in global politics all seem to be serving as stimuli for a renewed round of great power competition. The mounting tensions in East and South China Seas, 'trade war' between China and the US, and Russia's assertive engagement in Ukraine and Syria are cases in point.

Further, three recent US government documents — National Security Strategy (NSS), National Defense Strategy (NDS) and Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) — herald the return of great power competition by emphasising that terrorism is no longer the top US priority and that the US focus from now will be on strategic competition with great powers such as Russia and China.<sup>1</sup> The responses of China and Russia and their articulations also point to competition which can ultimately push the world into great power conflict.

Thus, on the one hand, the US, worried about the relative decline of its primacy, has declared that great power competition will be its primary focus from now on.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, it is prioritising military options and arms race over diplomacy and arms control. On the other, with worldviews that stand in contradiction to that of the US, China and Russia are also flexing their muscles. Against this backdrop of the return of great power conflict, this issue brief analyses the strategic documents and the actions of the US, China, and Russia<sup>3</sup> to draw insights into the prospects for productive cooperation among great powers on critical international issues.

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<sup>1</sup> 'National Security Strategy of the United States of America', December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>; '2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America' <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>; 'Nuclear Posture Review 2018', <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>

<sup>2</sup> See the Pentagon Study 'At Our Own Peril: DoD Risk Assessment in a Post-Primacy World', June 2017 <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=1358>;

<sup>3</sup> This brief uses the conventional definition of 'great power,' based on military capability and ability to influence outcomes of the international political system. The US, China, and Russia are nuclear weapons states with veto power in the UNSC. While US and China are the two most significant economies and military powers of the world, Russia's geography and energy resource help it to claim the status of great power.

## Threat of Great-Power Conflict: Hype vs Reality

The majority of the explanations for the return of great-power conflict hark back to the history of world politics, particularly the accounts of power shifts and their ramifications. Indeed, changes in the power hierarchy have been one of the most familiar explanations for great power conflict.<sup>4</sup> One such example is the idea of a 'Thucydides Trap', which has been articulated by Graham Allison in *Destined for War*. The ancient Greek historian Thucydides observed that "it was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable."<sup>5</sup>

In the present-day context, as China challenges American hegemony, misconceptions between these two powers about the other's actions and intentions could lead them into a similar trap. Allison analyses 16 cases of great power conflicts in the past 500 years, in which a rising power threatened to displace a ruling one and concludes that, among these, 12 ended in war.<sup>6</sup> British efforts to contain the rise of Germany and the outcome, First World War, are the 20<sup>th</sup> century reference for the destined path of power transition in global politics.

History is not the only source and support for reasoning about great power conflict. In January 2018, *The Economist* published a cover story titled, 'The Next War: The Growing Threat of Great Power Conflict', which detailed how shifts in technology and geopolitics are bringing the threat of great-power conflict back. In this view, "conflict on a scale and intensity not seen since the Second World War is once again plausible."<sup>7</sup> Discussing the likelihood of a second Korean War, the article observes that beyond the nuclear quandary in the Korean peninsula, China is at the cusp of great-power competition with the West.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, many of the defence industries in the US have started preparing for a great power conflict with serious investment in new technologies.<sup>9</sup> The massive Russian and Chinese arms modernisation efforts are also geared towards a similar objective.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See A F K Organski & J Kugler, *The War Ledger*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980; Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 1981; Michael Howard, *The Causes of Wars and Other Essays*, London: Temple Smith, 1983; Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and discord in the World Political Economy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984; Karen A Rasler & W. R Thompson, *The Great Powers, and Global Struggle: 1490–1990*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1984; Woosang Kim and James D. Morrow, 'When Do Power Shifts Lead to War?' *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Nov., 1992), pp. 896-922.

<sup>5</sup> Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> 'The Next War: The Growing Threat of Great Power Conflict', *The Economist*, 27 January 2018, <https://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21735586-how-shifts-technology-and-geopolitics-are-renewing-threat-growing-danger>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> See Dave Majumdar, Northrop Grumman Is Getting Ready for Great Power War (That Means Russia or China), *National Interest*, January 29, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> 'Meeting on drafting the 2016–2025 State Armament Programme', September 10, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46589>; Anthony H. Cordesman, 'Chinese Strategy and Military Modernization in 2016', <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinese-strategy-and-military-modernization-2016>

A large number of analysts hold the threat of great power conflict in their priority listing. Some see great power competition across all three regions of Eurasia and beyond as well as the revival of a global ideological struggle as the core characteristic of the emerging era.<sup>11</sup> Dmitri Trenin explains this phenomenon in a global context. He observes that the mounting tensions in the East and South China Seas, the arrival of nationalist leaders in Tokyo and New Delhi, and the revisionist, resurgent Russia as an emerging trend of great-power competition.<sup>12</sup> A recent report of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) titled 'Coping with Surprise in Great Power Conflicts' evaluates the plausibility and military implications of future great power conflicts.<sup>13</sup> Stephen F. Cohen, Professor Emeritus of Russian Studies in New York University and Princeton argues that both the NDS and NPR validate what he has been warning for the last 20 years — a second Cold War with Russia.<sup>14</sup>

### US and the future of Great-Power Conflict

At the core of the burgeoning scholarly interest in great-power conflict are three recent US government documents: the NSS, NDS and NPR. The NSS observes that “after being dismissed as a phenomenon of an earlier century, great power competition returned.” Further, it said that China and Russia began to reassert their regional and global influence and fielding military capabilities designed to deny American access. Through challenging the geopolitical advantages of the US, China and Russia are trying to change the international order in their favour, the NSS observed.<sup>15</sup>

While discussing future regional strategies, NSS also signalled the possibility of the return of an ideological struggle similar to the Cold War by stating that “a geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order is taking place in the Indo-Pacific region.”<sup>16</sup> The NSS explicitly and repeatedly criticises China’s efforts at using economic incentives and military threats to “persuade other states to heed its political and security agenda.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, in rather tough words, the document criticises China’s prestigious Belt and Road Initiative for its “unfair trade practices”

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<sup>11</sup> Hal Brands and Eric Edelman, Why Is the World So Unsettled? The End of the Post-Cold War Era and the Crisis of Global Order, <http://csbaonline.org/research/publications/why-is-the-world-so-unsettled-the-end-of-the-post-cold-war-era-and-the-cris>

<sup>12</sup> Dmitri Trenin, The Ukraine Crisis and Resumption of Great power Rivalry, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/ukraine\\_great\\_power\\_rivalry2014.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/ukraine_great_power_rivalry2014.pdf), p.15

<sup>13</sup> Mark F. Cancian, 'Coping with Surprise in Great Power Conflicts' CSIS Report, February 2018, [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180227\\_Cancian\\_CopingWithSurprise\\_wAppen\\_Web.pdf?OrD0fcMI7gGXNLM1AYJWoVsNT\\_xSxOiu](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180227_Cancian_CopingWithSurprise_wAppen_Web.pdf?OrD0fcMI7gGXNLM1AYJWoVsNT_xSxOiu)

<sup>14</sup> Stephen F Cohen, If America 'Won the Cold War', Why Is There Now a 'Second Cold War with Russia'? *The Nation*, 14 February 2018.

<sup>15</sup> National Security Strategy of the US, p.27

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.45-46

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.46

and “extractive economic policies.”<sup>18</sup> As the NSS shows, the US views China and its rise as a threat to US hegemony.

Similarly, the NDS also paints Russia and China with the same brush, but in darker hues. While releasing the document at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Secretary of Defence James N. Mattis indicated the shift in strategy by saying “great power competition, not terrorism, is now the primary focus of US national security.”<sup>19</sup> He also added that “we face growing threats from revisionist powers as different as China and Russia are from each other, nations that do seek to create a world consistent with their authoritarian models, pursuing veto authority over other nations' economic, diplomatic and security decisions.”<sup>20</sup> Mattis expressed a similar view in his testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee as well. He said: “A return of great power competition, marked by a resurgent and more aggressive Russian Federation and a rising, more confident and assertive China, places the international order under assault.”<sup>21</sup>

While the NSS talks of a Chinese threat to the Indo-Pacific region, the NDS presents it as an imminent threat to the rules-based world order in which China seeks to replace the US as the global leader. The strategy contains elements of both the notion of ‘winner takes all’ and the concept of Thucydides Trap. For instance, the US sees China’s military modernisation programme as an effort to displace US hegemony and achieve global pre-eminence. The basis of such calculations is the same strategic distrust and worst-case assumptions explained by Graham Allison. These fundamental shifts in US policy, prioritising inter-state competition, supplemented with similar responses from China and Russia, have brought the threat of great power conflict to the top of the global agenda. The new NPR also acknowledges the emergence of great power tensions as the driving force in international security. Taking advances in Russian and Chinese nuclear capabilities seriously, the review proposes a comprehensive nuclear recapitalisation programme to meet the future threat. Here too, the priority for Washington is to “maintain a forward military presence capable of deterring and, if necessary, defeating any adversary.”<sup>22</sup>

Many see these developments as an inevitable fall out of the Trump Presidency. However, the Obama administration had also identified Russia and China as the greatest security challenges to the US. For instance, in his Defense Posture Statement, the then Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter described “great power

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<sup>18</sup> Niharika Tagotra, The US National Security Strategy and Great Power Relations, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/the-us-national-security-strategy-and-great-power-relations/>

<sup>19</sup> Remarks by James Mattis on the National Defense Strategy, Department of Defence News Transcript, Jan. 19, 2018 <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1420042/remarks-by-secretary-mattis-on-the-national-defense-strategy/>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Secretary of Defence Jim Mattis, Senate Armed Services Committee Written Statement for the record June 13, 2017, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Mattis\\_06-13-17.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Mattis_06-13-17.pdf), p.4.

<sup>22</sup> National Security Strategy.p.47

competition from a resurgent Russia and a rising China” as the top two challenges for the US in future.<sup>23</sup> The statement continued:

“Russia and China are our most stressing competitors, as they have both developed and are continuing to advance military systems that threaten our advantages in specific areas, and in some cases, they are developing weapons and ways of war that seek to achieve their objectives in ways they hope would pre-empt a response by the United States.”<sup>24</sup>

## Chinese and Russian views on Great-Power Competition

While US strategic documents identify China and Russia as great powers and competition with these countries as its future priority,<sup>25</sup> the articulations and responses from China and Russia also signal the return of high politics. Both China and Russia view themselves as great powers. China’s economic weight, rapidly expanding military power including nuclear weapons, population size and UNSC veto virtually guarantee great power status. Though Russia has limited capabilities outside the nuclear realm and UNSC membership, it still enjoys the power to disrupt and reconfigure the international system. It has the ability to devastate a significant portion of the globe with its nuclear and conventional weapons arsenal. Another significant factor is Russia’s strategic geographical location, which makes it an indispensable player in both Asia and the Greater Middle East. Finally, with its huge energy resource, Russia is an energy superpower as well.

China, with its growing influence in the system, aims to reshape the international order to ensure that it is receptive to its concerns. Though China has not stated that great power competition is its priority, its grand strategy puts it in competition with the interests of the US and other powers in the system. When power transition theories suggested that arising power and the hegemon are unlikely to settle peacefully<sup>26</sup> and projected China as the latest challenger to US hegemony, China responded with a curious phrase: 'A new model of great power relations'<sup>27</sup> This notion refused to see great power relations as a zero-sum game and proposed a win-win situation for all through cooperation. It was Xi Jinping who proposed to establish a 'new type of Great Power relations' between China and the US during his trip to Washington in 2012. For several years thereafter, the promise of a 'new model' was nearly impossible for Chinese media and officials to avoid mentioning. For instance,

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<sup>23</sup> Ash Carter, Defence Posture Statement 2017, February 2016, [https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2017DODPOSTURE\\_FINAL\\_MAR17UpdatePage4\\_WEB.PDF](https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2017DODPOSTURE_FINAL_MAR17UpdatePage4_WEB.PDF), p.56

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.p.5

<sup>25</sup> Note 15, p.27

<sup>26</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, 'Can China rise peacefully?', The National Interest, 25 Oct. 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/can-china-rise-peacefully-10204>.

<sup>27</sup> See Xi Jinping meets with National Security Advisor to the US President Thomas Donilon, People's Daily, 28 May 2013.

in September 2015, on the eve of President Xi's visit to the United States, Cui Tiankai, the Chinese Ambassador to the US, used the phrase 12 times in a single editorial in the *Peoples' Daily*.<sup>28</sup> However, since Donald Trump came to office, China has abandoned the phrase and focused on donning the mantle of global leadership. Xi's address on economic globalization in Davos is a case in point.<sup>29</sup>

It is true that, while the global media extensively debated the portrayal of China in the NSS as a threat to US hegemony, the *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, did not even react to the criticism. However, militarily, China continues to invest in capabilities that are explicitly designed to exploit perceived US military vulnerabilities. China's Military Strategy (2015) asserts that its armed forces will gradually shoulder more international responsibilities and obligations.<sup>30</sup> Its anti-access/area-denial capabilities threaten to erode the foundation of the US security commitments in Asia.<sup>31</sup> Chinese policies towards the Asia-Pacific inevitably challenge the US approach. For instance, in January 2017, 'China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation' strongly criticised the US on the issues of Anti-Ballistic Missile and South China Sea.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the Chinese military today represents a cutting-edge combat force that fields increasingly sophisticated capabilities in significant numbers. Its fifth-generation stealth fighter, the J-20, poses a vital threat to US air and naval power in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>33</sup> The trade war between the US and China and Chinese plans to pay for oil in yuan instead of the dollar in future also indicate that the relationship between the two great powers will not be friendly.<sup>34</sup>

The deteriorating relationship between Russia and the West and Russia's worldview also enhance the threat of great power conflict. Russia believes that the Western system of order threatens its interests and wants to work towards the development of a new world order that promotes Russian interests.<sup>35</sup> Russia's security and military policy after 2014 sees the world as a hostile place marked by stiff competition amongst major powers and all documents emphasize the importance of military force

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<sup>28</sup> David Wertime, 'China Quietly Abandoning Bid for 'New Model of Great Power relations' with US', *Foreign Policy*, March 2, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> In Davos, Xi expressed Chinese desire to play a more significant global role as the United States turns inward. See [http://www.china.org.cn/node\\_7247529/content\\_40569136.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/node_7247529/content_40569136.htm)

<sup>30</sup> 'China's Military Strategy,' The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, May 27, 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Ken Jimbo, 'Sino-Russian Military Cooperation and Japanese Defense Policy', <http://www.nbr.org/publications/element.aspx?id=930>

<sup>32</sup> See 'China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation', January 11, 2017, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1429771.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1429771.shtml)

<sup>33</sup> Abraham Denmark, 'Competing with China in the Indo-Pacific' <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/competing-china-the-indo-pacific>; Abraham Ait, 'How China's New Stealth Fighter Could Soon Surpass the US F-22 Raptor', <https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/how-chinas-new-stealth-fighter-could-soon-surpass-the-us-f-22-raptor/>

<sup>34</sup> 'Exclusive: China taking first steps to pay for oil in yuan this year - sources', <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-oil-yuan-exclusive/exclusive-china-taking-first-steps-to-pay-for-oil-in-yuan-this-year-sources-idUSKBN1H51FA>

<sup>35</sup> Vladimir Putin, 'Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club,' Sochi, Russia: October 24, 2014.

in global politics.<sup>36</sup> Russia's military doctrine also reflects its tense relationship with the West. Maintaining Russia's pre-eminence in the post-Soviet space remains its key foreign policy priority.<sup>37</sup>

The relationship between Russia and the West is in a new low with allegations of Russian involvement in US elections and also in the nerve agent attack against a former Russian spy on British soil. While NATO identifies Russia as the principal security threat to the West, alongside the Islamic State and Ebola, Russia is engaged in nuclear sabre-rattling to remind the West of the possible costs of military action against Russia. Russia is also making efforts to form a grand anti-US alliance with China.<sup>38</sup> The Syrian conflict is another example of evolving Russia-US clash. While Russia supports Assad regime, the US backs some of the opposition forces including the Kurds.

Though the Cold War ended almost three decades ago, one of the alliances that owes its origins to that struggle, NATO, still plays a pivotal role in the mounting tensions with Russia. The crisis in Ukraine is a case in point. As John Mearsheimer argues, it was the West's fault, NATO enlargement and EU's eastward expansion that provoked Putin to use military force.<sup>39</sup> NATO's defensive drill called 'Iron Wolf 2017' to deter Russian aggression in the Kaliningrad enclave of Baltic and Russia's response 'Zapad 2017' contributed a lot to the mounting tension.<sup>40</sup> These military drills represent a shift from a "political" dispute to a "military" conflict between the two sides.

## Conclusion

US strategic documents and the Chinese and Russian responses confirm that the geopolitical competition among the great powers is rising. However, none of this leads to the automatic conclusion that a great power conflict will break out anytime in the near future. Viewed through the prism of power transition theory, US strategies and decision to prioritise military options over diplomacy could pave the way towards

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<sup>36</sup> See 'Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation', December 26, 2014, <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/41d527556bec8deb3530.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> 'Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation', November 30, 2016, [http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCkKB6BZ29/content/id/2542248?p\\_p\\_id=101\\_INSTANCE\\_CptlCkKB6BZ29&\\_101\\_INSTANCE\\_CptlCkKB6BZ29\\_languageId=en\\_GB](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCkKB6BZ29/content/id/2542248?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_CptlCkKB6BZ29&_101_INSTANCE_CptlCkKB6BZ29_languageId=en_GB)

<sup>38</sup> ArtyomLukin, 'Sino-Russian Entente Would Move the World a Step Closer to 1914'[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/artyom-lukin/china-russia-world-war-three\\_b\\_5625485.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/artyom-lukin/china-russia-world-war-three_b_5625485.html); ArtyomLukin, '25 Years Later, Another Wall Is Rising Between the West and Russia', [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/artyom-lukin/berlin-wall-25th-anniversary-russia\\_b\\_6115850.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/artyom-lukin/berlin-wall-25th-anniversary-russia_b_6115850.html)

<sup>39</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin', *Foreign policy*, September/October 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Jack Anderson, 'New American-Russian Conflict: A Confrontation beyond Cold War,' <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2018/03/17/new-american-russian-conflict-a-confrontation-beyond-cold-war/> 2

military conflict. If the hegemon decides to check its decline by escalating tensions with other great powers in the system, the risk of conflict will rise.

The fundamentally anarchic nature of world politics supplemented by the deepening misperceptions and faulty calculations of the great powers would suggest a similar conclusion. Great power relations are the sole prominent make-or-break issue in determining whether major war or relative peace will characterize the international system. It also virtually conditions the response of the global community to other significant challenges. In any case, the geopolitical competition among great powers with or without direct conflict will lead to a situation where productive cooperation among great powers on international issues is likely to prove difficult. Consequently, it will limit the ability of the great powers to make positive systemic changes in the world order.

## About the Authors



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