

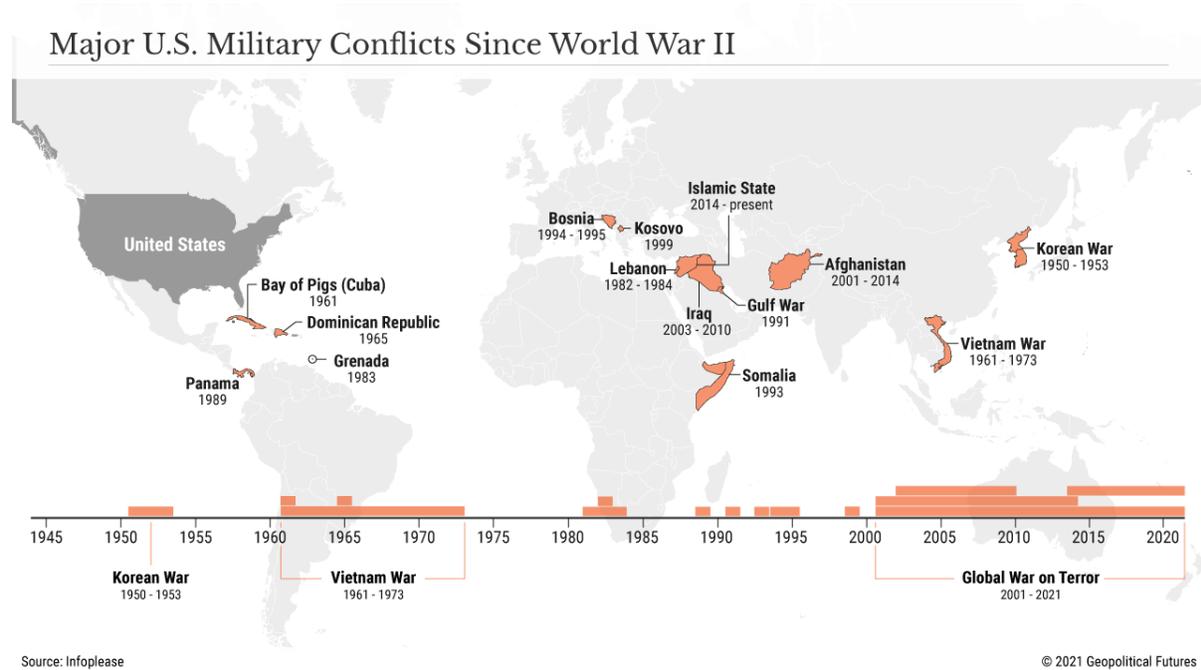
Facing Reality: A New American Strategy

by **George Friedman** - August 17, 2021

The United States has been at war for almost the entire 21st century, and it's only 2021. In contrast, the United States was at war for just 17 percent of the entire 20th century, during which it won the world wars, defeat in which may have led to existential transformations of the country and thus of the international order. But just as it lost Korea and Vietnam – wars that were not an existential threat – so too has it lost in Iraq and Afghanistan.

This may suggest that the U.S. engages in too many conflicts that are subcritical and is careless in how it fights them, while it fights critical wars with great precision. But to understand why, we must begin by understanding the geopolitical reality of the United States. Geopolitics defines the imperatives and constraints of a nation. Strategy shapes that reality into action. And the defeat of the United States in Afghanistan after 20 years compels a reevaluation of American national strategy, not only of how we fight wars but also of how we determine which wars should be fought.

The thing about major wars, though, is that they are rare, or should be. The international system typically doesn't develop quickly enough for major powers to challenge each other for a long time. And yet, only five years passed from World War II to Korea. Vietnam came 12 years after that, then Desert Storm and Kosovo in the 1990s, and of course Iraq and Afghanistan in the early 2000s. The frequency of wars raises the critical question of whether they were imposed on the U.S. or selected by it, and whether history is moving so quickly now that the tempo of war has likewise accelerated. If the latter isn't true, then there is a strong possibility the U.S. is following a defective strategy that profoundly weakens its power by curbing its ability to control world events.



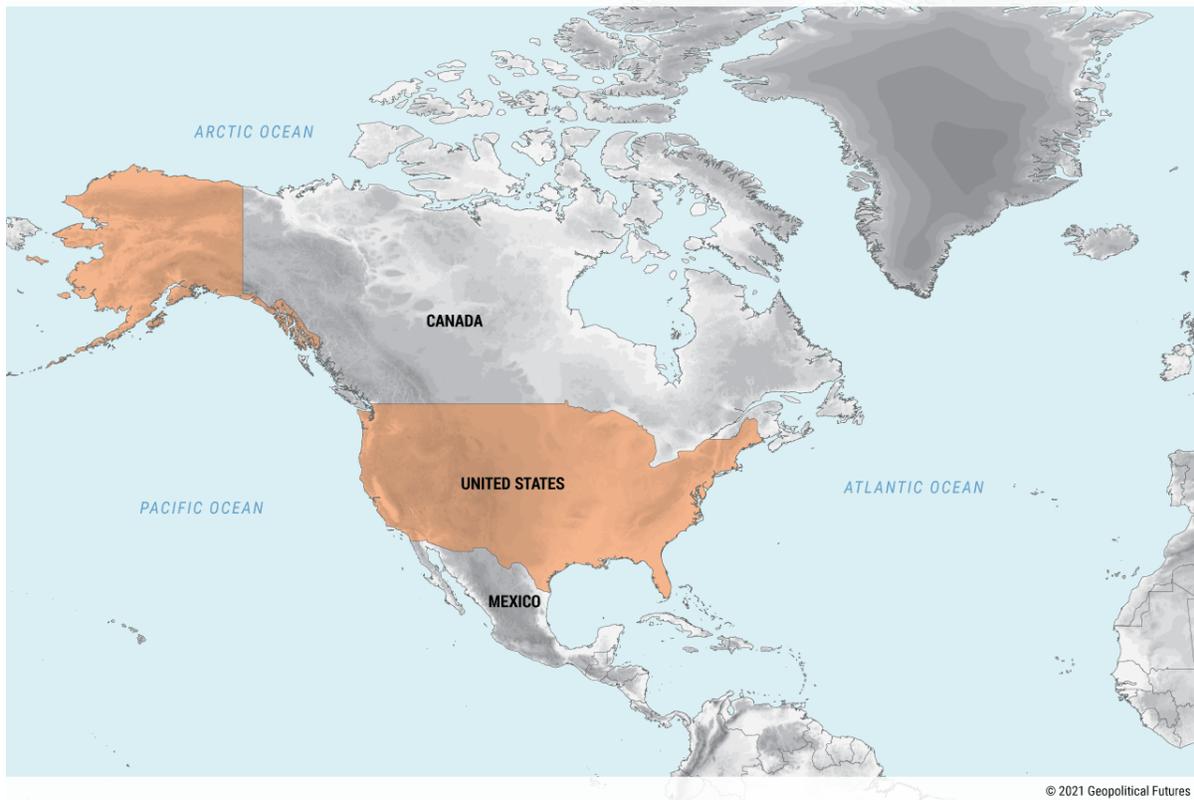
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The key measure of strategy is its relative simplicity. Geopolitics is complex. Tactics are detailed. Strategy should, in theory, be straightforward insofar as it represents the main thrust of a nation’s imperatives. For the United States, that strategy might be controlling ocean chokepoints while avoiding detailed plans for other areas of the world. A successful strategy must represent the essential core of a nation’s intent. Excessive complexity represents uncertainty or, worse, a compendium of strategic imperatives that outstrip a nation’s ability to execute or understand. A nation with an excess of strategic goals has not made the difficult choices on what matters and what doesn’t. Complexity represents an unwillingness to make those decisions. Deception is a tactical matter. Self-deception is a strategic failure. Only so much can be done, and understanding priorities without ambiguity and resisting the creeping expansion of strategy is the indispensable craft of the strategist.

The Geopolitical Reality of the United States

1. The United States is virtually immune to land attacks. It is flanked by Canada and Mexico, neither of which are capable of mounting a threat. This means U.S. armed forces are primarily designed to project power rather than defend the homeland.

Geopolitical Reality of the United States



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2. The United States controls the North Atlantic and Pacific oceans. An invasion from the Eastern Hemisphere would have to defeat U.S. naval and air forces in one of these oceans in such a way as to prevent interdiction of reinforcement and resupply.
3. Any existential threat to the United States will always originate from Eurasia. The United States must work to limit the development of forces, especially naval forces, that could threaten U.S. control of the oceans. In other words, the key is to divert Eurasian military energy from the sea.
4. Nuclear weapons are a stabilizing force. It is unlikely that the Cold War would have ended as it did without two nuclear powers managing the conflict. Nuclear weapons essentially prevented World War III. Maintaining a nuclear force stabilizes the system, and preventing new nuclear powers from emerging is desirable but not entirely essential.
5. The United States' position in North America has made it the largest economy in the world, the largest importer of goods and the largest source of international investment. The United States is

also a generator of international culture. It also defines IT culture worldwide. This can be a substitute for military power, particularly before near-war situations.

6. The primary interest of the United States is to maintain a stable international system that does not challenge U.S. boundaries. It has little interest in risk-taking. The greatest risk comes from attempts to retain control of the seas since only great powers can threaten U.S. maritime hegemony.

7. The great weakness of the United States since World War II is being drawn into conflicts that are not in the U.S. geopolitical interest and that diffuse U.S. power for an extended period of time. This is done primarily but not exclusively by strategic terrorism carried out by nations or non-national actors.

8. The United States is a moral project and, like all moral projects, thinks its model superior to others. Moral intervention is rarely in the geopolitical interests of the United States, and it almost never ends well. For the United States, the temptation to engage in these wars should be avoided to concentrate on direct interests and because these interventions frequently do more harm than good. If intervention is deemed necessary, it should be ruthlessly temporary.

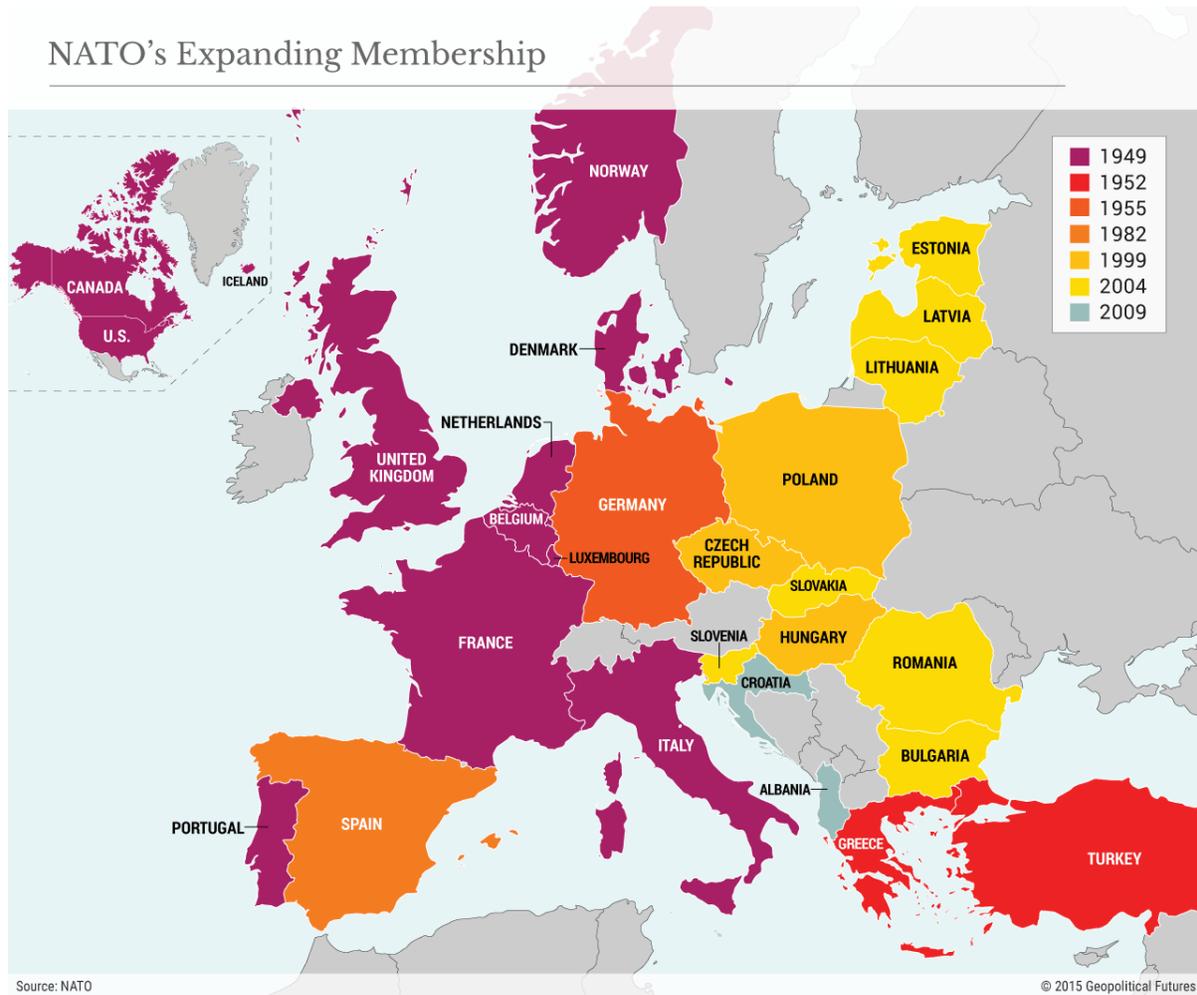
Implementing the Strategy

1. North America: Maintaining U.S. dominance and harmony in North America is central to all U.S. strategy. Mexico and Canada cannot threaten the United States militarily, and both are bound to the United States economically. However, any power hostile to the United States would welcome an opportunity to draw either country into a relationship with it. It is imperative that the United States follow a strategy that always makes a relationship with the U.S. far more attractive than a third-party alliance.

2. Atlantic and Pacific: Command of the oceans is primarily a technical problem. Whereas it was once achieved by battleships and then aircraft carriers, it is now an issue of long-range missiles and other weapons. The key to this is to know the location of the enemy in an environment in which aircraft cannot easily survive over a fleet. Since the key to command of the sea is now reconnaissance for targeting information, space-based systems followed by unmanned aerial vehicles are the critical variable in controlling the sea. The U.S. Navy and the U.S. Space Force (as it matures) will be the most important services controlling the seas henceforth.

3. Eurasia: The United States faces Eurasia on two fronts: Across the Atlantic it faces Europe, and across the Pacific it faces East Asia. After World War II, Europe was Washington's primary focus.

The threat of the era was the Soviet Union. The idea was that a European peninsula conquered by the Soviet Union would provide the technology and personnel to construct a fleet that could challenge the U.S. The solution was to create NATO. NATO and the concept of mutually assured destruction blocked Soviet westward expansion and, in the event war broke out, would direct the Soviet navy from trying to control sea lanes to trying to interdict U.S. convoys reinforcing NATO. The threat now is China's seeking to secure access to the sea. The U.S. has created an informal alliance stretching from Japan to the Indian Ocean to contain China. It has also used economic power to pressure China. The key in both strategies was an early response and to use military power to increase the risk of war on the Soviet or Chinese part and then wait to see if they make a move.



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4. Nuclear Weapons: The awe and sense of doom generated by nuclear weapons have died down since the end of the Cold War, but nukes are still the quintessential American weapon. U.S. strategy

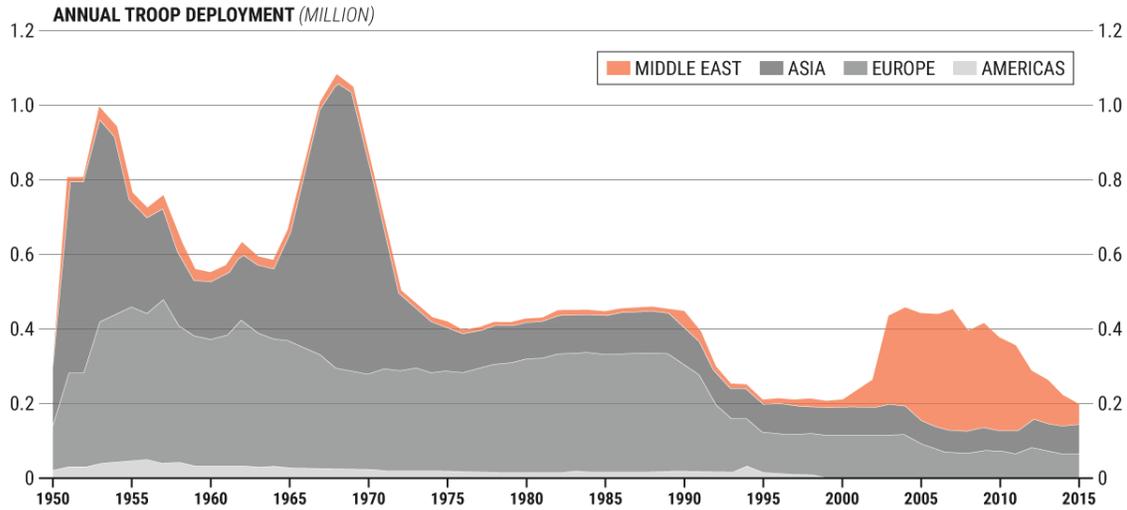
post-World War II is to construct boundaries against significant enemies to see how they react – i.e., push the boundaries or invite a stable confrontation. In this case, nuclear weapons are the wall. They are not an offensive tool for a country that should avoid offensive operations. They are stabilizers for a country that needs to pursue the status quo.

5. Economics: In most countries, economics limits both the readiness and deterrent power of a military. In the United States, the economy actually provides both. In terms of purchasing power, it creates a stable domestic base that can generate military technology and a significant force. In terms of managing global relations, the economy provides non-military incentives and penalties. As the largest importer in the world, the ability of the U.S. to limit purchases can reshape policy. Used prudently, the willingness to purchase goods from a country can create relationships that prevent the need for military action. Washington needs to develop a strategic economic program that reduces the risk of combat and increases potential allies that might be prepared to carry the burden on shared conflicts. This requires a redefinition of how the private sector makes decisions to some degree.

6. Attaining the primary interest: The primary interest of the United States is to protect the homeland against foreign invasion. The purpose of that security is to maintain an economic system able to provide wealth to the American public and to maintain the regime. Put simply, some things will threaten security, and some will not. For those things that threaten the nation, there must be careful calculus of whether the threat and the cost of mitigating the threat are aligned. The great danger of the United States has been to recognize threats without recognizing either the cost or the probability of successfully containing them. This has led to a series of wars that the United States did not win and that averted attention from core interests while at times destabilizing the nation.

7. Terrorism: Terrorist groups are small and diffuse and are therefore unable to be countered with traditional military action. Time and again, militaries struggle to determine where these groups are and contain them, even if they are in a country known to harbor them (Afghanistan, for example). Intelligence organizations and special forces are essential in this regard. National strategy cannot be diverted from geopolitically defined interests because doing so disperses U.S. power against a group that poses no existential threat against the United States.

U.S. Troop Deployment by Region



Sources: Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, Defense Manpower Data Center, Congressional Research Service

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There are, of course, foreign policy issues that need to be managed but that do not constitute a significant part of the national strategy. The dilemma is that those who work on such matters regard them as supremely important, as they should. But this turns into a bureaucratic matter or a political one. Minor State Department officials will search for importance, and presidents will search for votes. National strategy may be clear, but its administration is complex. It ultimately falls to the president to set the ever-shifting boundaries and preserve the essential character of national strategy. Otherwise, minor matters may become major wars and destroy a presidency.

Non-Strategic Wars: Vietnam and Afghanistan

The decision to go to war in Afghanistan was rooted in a misunderstanding of American geopolitics and strategy, not unlike what happened in Vietnam decades earlier. The United States fought World War II to prevent the consolidation of Europe under a single power. That was based on an overriding American imperative: preventing a challenge to U.S. domination of the Atlantic. World War II broke up Germany, but the Soviet Union emerged as the new threat capable of dominating Europe. An American alliance, NATO, and the danger of thermonuclear war blocked Soviet expansion. Europe was effectively locked down.

The United States understood this as a struggle against communism. In part, this was correct, since

the Soviets wanted to weaken the United States. With nuclear weapons rendering direct confrontation impossible, the only strategy open to the Soviets was to attempt to increase the presence of communist regimes outside of Europe in the hopes that the U.S. would reduce its presence in Europe to deal with them. The U.S. was sensitive to the spread of communist regimes but generally responded only with political and economic pressure and covert operations. One exception was the Cuban missile crisis, which was a fundamental threat to North America's security and which the U.S. countered by threatening war, leading to Soviet capitulation. After Korea, there were no more full-scale anti-communist wars until Vietnam. The U.S. took the rise of a communist insurgency in Vietnam as more threatening than when the same occurred in Congo or Syria.

Vietnam did not pose a strategic threat to the United States. Even unified it could not threaten U.S. control of the Pacific, and the fall of Vietnam would represent only an extension of North Vietnam. But the U.S. saw two reasons for intervening there. One was the domino theory, in which the fall of Vietnam would lead to the spread of communism throughout Southeast Asia. The second reason was credibility. The U.S. alliance system, particularly NATO, depended on the belief that the United States would carry out obligations to resist communist expansion. The U.S. was particularly concerned about Europe, where French President Charles de Gaulle was raising questions about American reliability and advocating an independent nuclear deterrent. Any shift in the alliance would be partial but would weaken the wall containing the Soviets.

The words "domino" and "credibility" dominated the case for intervention in Vietnam. Not mentioned was the possibility that a defeat might accelerate these processes. In the end, the fact that this was a communist expansion trumped any consideration that this was a non-strategic war. Another fact was ignored. During World War II, the United States was responding to aggression rather than initiating war. That made a critical difference in the domestic political dynamism. In Vietnam, the U.S. had to be successful in a non-strategic war – a war that didn't appear essential and wasn't essential.

The need to maintain a political consensus for the Vietnam War was not a luxury. It was crucial. But American leaders believed U.S. forces could rapidly crush the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army. The problem was that the U.S. military was created for a European war, a strategic war. It was trained to fight against a Soviet armored thrust using aircraft, armor and the complex logistics needed to support such an operation. The military was not shaped to fight a war against light, mobile infantry in terrain ranging from hills to jungles. Washington assumed that airstrikes on Haiphong would force capitulation, and it accounted for neither the near-religious commitment of Vietnamese troops nor the ruthlessness of the North Vietnamese regime. The U.S. came as close as possible to winning after the failed Tet Offensive, but command failures, logistical problems and operational

constraints, along with rapid reinforcement by the North, rendered that impossible. And that was supplemented by a misunderstanding of the event by the American press that was instrumental in turning the U.S. public against the war.

The problem with the Vietnam War was that it was not strategically necessary. The U.S. public would sanction a cheap victory but not an endless war. It knew that neither the domino theory nor America's credibility depended on it. The commanders in the war had fought in World War II, where both fronts were strategically essential. They and their troops were not accustomed to accepting a war that would run for seven years before American capitulation.

A similar process happened in Afghanistan. As a nation, Afghanistan was not strategic to the United States. Al-Qaida had planned the attack on 9/11 from there, and the initial use of the CIA, some U.S. special operations forces and anti-Taliban tribes in defeating the group made sense. But al-Qaida escaped to Pakistan, and a decision had to be made either to withdraw or to attempt to take control of Afghanistan. The obvious answer was to leave, but the one chosen was to stay and to begin by launching airstrikes on various Afghan cities. The Taliban controlled those cities, and the air attack was intended to break them. They left the cities, and there was hope that the war was won. But the Taliban had simply retreated and dispersed, and over time they regrouped in the areas they came from and knew best.

The mission evolved into trying to destroy a force deeply embedded in Afghan society and geography. The Taliban could be contained in their areas, at a cost in casualties, but it was impossible to break them. If the Viet Cong fought with near-religious commitment, the Taliban fought with genuine religious commitment. The U.S. tried to create a pro-American Afghan National Army as it had created the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. The idea of creating an army in the middle of a war has many flaws, but the greatest is that the first recruits they got would be sent by communists or the Taliban. The result was an army that had its enemy in strategic positions. The enemy would anticipate any offensive the new army might mount.

A military force is created to satisfy strategic imperatives. When a non-strategic war is fought, the chances are overwhelming that the force, and particularly the command structure, will not be ready. Vietnam took seven years. Afghanistan took 20 years. Neither war ended because of a lack of patience by Americans. They ended because the enemy had matured; in Vietnam and Afghanistan, while U.S. troops rotated in and out, the enemy was at home. And they ended because what had been true for years had become manifest: The U.S. couldn't win, and no great damage to American secrets would flow from the end of the war.

Neither war fit into the strategy imposed on the U.S. by geopolitical reality. Neither military was designed to fight a war against a committed, experienced, agile light infantry. Fighting a non-strategic war inevitably weakens the military deployed. And in both wars, the enemy might have been underestimated, but an ill-prepared American force was greatly overestimated. What ensued was not the failure of the troops on the ground. It was a failure of training, command and, most of all, the fact that U.S. troops wanted to go home. The Taliban were home.

Geopolitics defines strategy. Strategy defines the force. The price of engaging in a non-strategic war is high, and the temptation to fight non-strategic wars is great. They open with real alarm and slowly descend into failure. As important, they distract from the nation's strategic priorities. The Vietnam War significantly weakened U.S. capabilities in Europe, a weakness the Soviets did not take advantage of. Afghanistan didn't undermine the force, but it once again shook its confidence and the confidence of the U.S. public. It did not, however, diminish American power.

The two wars lasted as long as they did because the presidents involved (it is always the president) found it easier to continue them than to end them. Losing a war is hard. Deciding that you lost a war still underway and stopping it is harder. And that is the price you pay for non-strategic wars.

From the Non-Strategic to the Extremely Strategic: China

The Soviet threat to Europe and the Atlantic was managed without war. The strategic nature of the threat compelled a clear understanding, appropriate forces and political support. In due course the weaker party, the Soviets, cracked under the economic pressure imposed by the United States. That is the ideal strategic outcome.

The threat in Europe has diminished greatly. The Russians are seeking to regain lost territories but are in no position to threaten Europe. The trans-Atlantic alliance structure the United States created is no longer relevant and will not be for years, if ever. Alliances are vital in generating additional

military and economic power. They provide geographical advantages and shift the psychology of adversaries. But as the strategic condition evolves, so does the alliance. The strategic reality of 1945 was a powerful Russia and a weak Europe. The strategic situation today is a weakened Russia and a prosperous Europe. The need for NATO, therefore, shifts to something less central in U.S. policy and less defined by what is to be done, just as it shifts in other members. The danger of alliances that outlast their utility is a distortion of national strategy such that they can weaken the United States instead of strengthening it. The worst-case scenario is that they can draw the United States into policies and wars that undermine rather than enhance its national security.



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The diminution of the European theater leaves the United States free to deal with the Pacific Ocean and the potential threat from China. China urgently needs to force the United States back, away from its shores and deeper into the Pacific. This began with the American demand for equal access to the Chinese market, China's refusal and the United States' imposition of tariffs on China. The economic issue was not critical, but China reasonably drew the conclusion that the U.S. view of China had changed and that China had to be prepared for a worst-case scenario.

The worst case would be that the U.S. would impose an embargo on China's east coast ports and/or along the island chokepoints east of China. China is a mercantile power dependent on maritime trade. Closure of the ports, as well as the Strait of Malacca, would cripple China. The U.S. has not

threatened this, but China must act on the worst-case scenario. The United States has created an informal alliance structure that concerns China. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam and Singapore are all formally or informally aligned with the United States, or simply hostile to China. In addition, India, Australia and the United Kingdom are actively involved in this quasi-alliance. China must assume that at some point the U.S. will try to bring pressure if not on the ports then by a blockade of this line of islands.

U.S. Partners and Chinese Maritime Chokepoints



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The United States is roughly in the position that it was in during the Cold War. It has an alliance that provides it the geography needed to meet a Chinese attack, to launch an attack or simply to hold its position. China must act to change this reality. One option is major economic concessions to the United States and others in this group. Another option is to launch an attack designed to break the blockade line. Another is to simply hold this position unless and until the U.S. moves. Or possibly China could do what the Soviets did: create a non-strategic threat that the U.S. can't resist, given its well-known appetite for the non-strategic.

Launching a war opens the door to defeat as well as victory. China cannot be certain what would happen, and it is not clear what the bill for a defeat would be. The Chinese economy is always under pressure, with vast numbers of relatively poor people. Economic concessions are not a possibility. Staying in this position allows the U.S. to make the first move, and given what China sees as U.S. military adventurism, Beijing is not sure the U.S. won't overestimate China's power. Therefore, the most likely choice would be a diversion.

The Chinese have the ability to force regime change in any number of countries that would appear to the United States as a direct challenge, like Vietnam and Afghanistan did. The U.S. tendency to accept these non-strategic challenges also includes Iraq and, to some extent, Korea. China might draw the same conclusion the Soviets did, which is that the U.S. will respond to a threat even if it is non-strategic. China has not engaged in such activities for a long time, but the current situation is riskier than before. Creating a diversion could be seen as the low-risk option.

This is the ultimate problem with the American century: It is reactive, and it sometimes reacts to chum cast on the water by its enemies in the hope the U.S. will bite. The central problem is that U.S. strategy is not driven by the strategic, and as a result, distinguishing the non-strategic from the strategic has been difficult. A new American strategy is needed to provide the discipline to avoid a Chinese attempt to divert the United States.

The ideal outcome of the U.S.-Chinese dispute is a negotiated settlement. Neither can absorb the cost of war, although the U.S. has a geographic advantage that can neutralize any weapon advantage China might have gained. And this is the point of the strategy. First, war is to be rare, not the norm. Avoiding war requires geopolitical, strategic and disciplined thinking. The U.S. stood on the line in Europe for 45 years and ended the conflict with the Soviet Union peacefully, except for the Vietnam War, which was not material. The U.S. and China will maneuver over the Western Pacific, but if the U.S. focuses on strategy, it will likely not end in war. Preparation for war is essential. Throwing away that preparation on non-strategic and bloody distractions is the American habit it

must overcome.

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