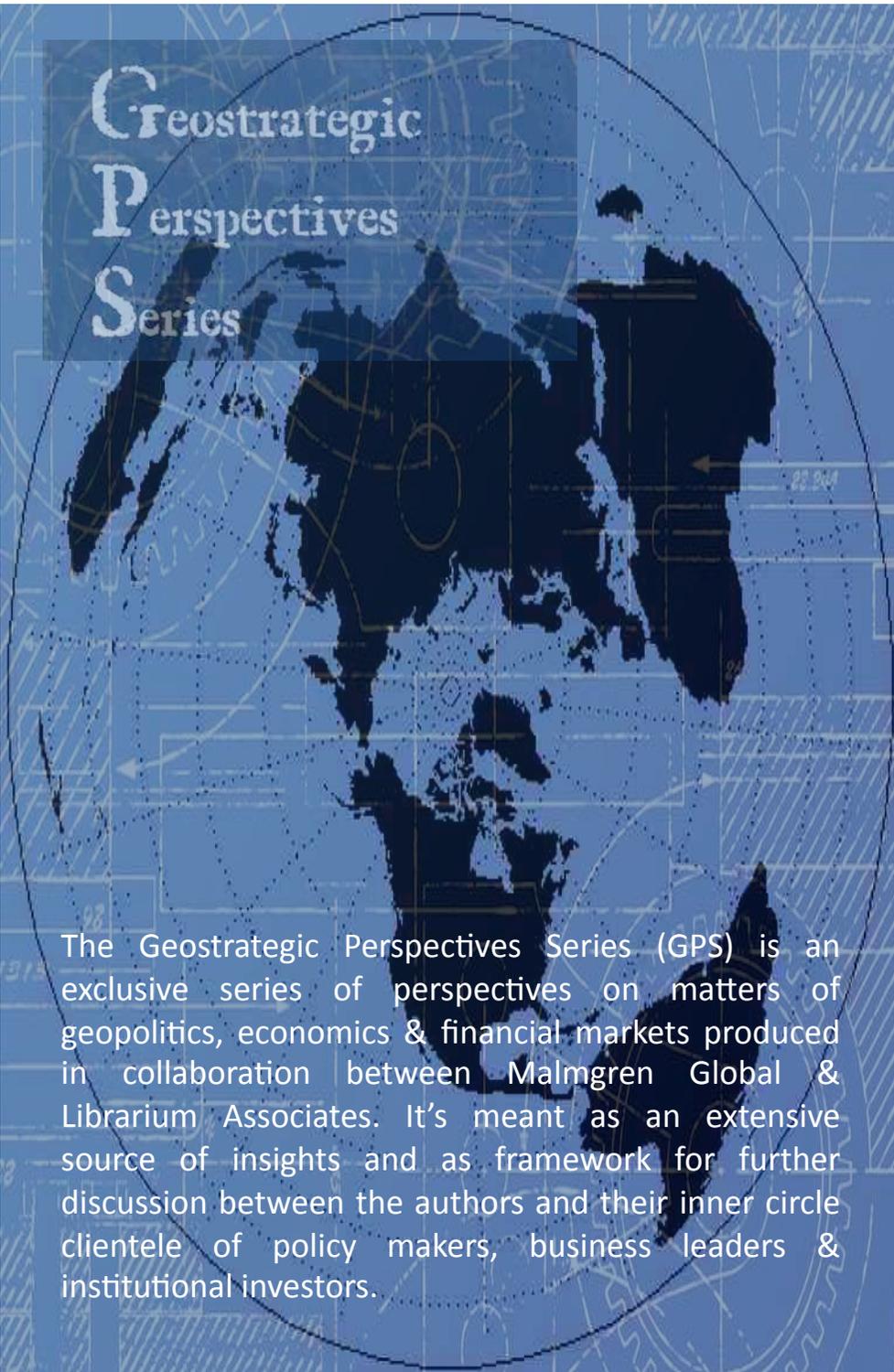


Geostrategic
Perspectives
Series

THE RUSSIA QUESTION...

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INTRODUCTION

This report aims to outline and analyze current trends and dynamics in the increasingly hostile relationship between the US and the so-called 'revisionist powers' with specific attention to imminent threats posed by Russia's escalated use of unconventional warfare across hybrid battlegrounds. There is increasingly an evident need for a public recognition that the US, and its allies - who have supported the liberal Post-war order based on democracy and capitalism, are under attack. An absence of response encourages escalation of probes to test limits of tolerance of America and of all nations that relied upon American security protection since the end of the Cold War. Temporizing in search of a new strategy of response to deep Russian intrusions reveals lack of strategy and even of will.

Deeper and more disruptive interventions will likely emerge well into the future until a point of hard resistance is demonstrated. A long and perilous conflict – cold and hot – has been set in motion by Russia that cannot be left unanswered. What is needed is a comprehensive strategic plan that makes clear the intrusions that are unacceptable and penalties that may be inflicted on adversary's leaders or their proxies who may be exploring the boundaries of Western tolerance of externally initiated provocations. Within a new enhanced security strategy a multiplicity of responses, both symmetric and asymmetric, should be devised to penalize unacceptable behavior by adversaries. This report is meant as an orientation on the current state of affairs and as a framework for further conversation. Our purpose is to spur an active debate on the optimal path forward at a time when little leadership is being demonstrated in any of the capitals of nations, in which governments, private institutions and social order that have been targets. In the words of Adm. Mike Rogers, director of the National Security Agency speaking recently to the Senate armed services committee;

"I believe that President Putin has clearly come to the conclusion that there's little price to pay here, and that therefore I can continue this activity. Everything, both as the director of NSA and what I see on the cyber command side, leads me to believe that if we don't change the dynamic here, this is going to continue and 2016 won't be viewed as something isolated. This is something that will be sustained over time."

Much attention is currently being paid to the 'noise' in the news surrounding the various investigations into the Russian interference into the 2016 US election. In essence this is a selective approach driven by media sensationalism, politics and a social yearning to assign blame for an unexpected intrusion into what were naively thought to be purely domestic matters of partisan rivalries. In reality this troublesome moment in time is just a fraction of an ongoing competitive geostrategic contest between the dominant power – the US – and the key challengers – Russia & China. Objectively, there is need to recall that the US itself has historically been actively pursuing similar strategies of interference all around the globe in order to generate outcomes that aimed at meeting its own objectives. Russia/Soviet Union has also been engaged in similar tactics for decades. None of this is really new. The difference now is technology makes interventions easier, with less physical presence, harder to detect and even harder to block. The specific details of the current battle, playing out in the media in front of us, will most likely be largely forgotten by history. These times will be remembered not for the details of who did what, but for the seemingly dramatic escalation of cross-border assertion of power and influence through non-military means.

Looking further into the future, the scope for systemic damage through direct intervention in financial markets, I.o.T, sophisticated propaganda, etc. is growing. The nation's task now is to defend existing systems, but also to encourage an international, collaborative effort to discourage public or private efforts to inflict systemic damage. A suborbital EMP that would inflict widespread, crippling systemic damage has been thought about ever since the Soviets were working on it at the time of Cuban Missile Crisis. Now there are growing new opportunities for systemic damage to adversaries that extend far beyond use of physical weapons like thermonuclear explosions far above Earth's surface.

Strategic decisions made now on how we move forward in countering this reality will be crucial in order to negate the apparent increase in hostility and create a more constructive framework for future cooperation where possible and restrained competition where needed.

THE RUSSIA QUESTION & WIDER GEO-STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS.

It appears likely that Russians have for years been probing various channels of unconventional warfare, testing ideas and seeking to establish boundaries, counter actions, and response times in continuous exploration for the most effective tools to pursue their agenda. The press, media and some analysts have pointed to what has been dubbed the so-called 'Gerasimov Doctrine' as some kind of comprehensive and coherent master plan devised by the Chief of Staff of the Russian military. What we have witnessed is really a far more pragmatic process of trial and error, with Russians seeing themselves as operating from an inferior strategic military position.

The Russian leadership has pursued the traditional tenets of guerrilla warfare and enhanced them with the use of propaganda tools that have in turn been recently enhanced by growth in technological communications including the exploding use and variety of social media platforms. The irregular, non-conventional activities gives their campaign a random uncoordinated appearance following no set pattern, giving no fixed target for enemies to attack, elusive and invisible, leading to frustration over ones inability to apply ones superior strength in response. The emphasis is not on destroying the opponent in direct battle but on weakening and unbalancing it before the real battle even begins. At its core, unconventional non-military intrusions are aimed at disruption of decision making in other countries, especially aimed at undermining trust in their governments among peoples of other nations. All of these are textbook examples of guerrilla warfare.

Mr. Gerasimov is quoted as stating in 2013:

"We must not copy foreign experience and chase after leading countries. But we must outstrip them and occupy leading positions ourselves. Long-distance, contactless actions against the enemy are becoming the main means of achieving combat and operational goals. All this is supplemented by military means of a concealed character, including carrying out actions of informational conflict and the actions of special-operations forces."

As stated in the referenced FT article; Valery Gerasimov, "The general with a doctrine for Russia";

"Depiction of a hybrid battleground involving political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures appeared prophetic a year later. Russian soldiers in unmarked uniforms popped up in Crimea to launch what became the annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula, following demonstrations against a pro-western government orchestrated by Russian agents."

Western observers were quick to treat his essay as the blueprint for a future Russian hybrid attack against the west. From the proliferation of pro-Russian news media and financial support for anti-establishment politicians in the EU, to allegations of Russian hackers targeting western political campaigns and elections, all of it led back to the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine."

In the 21st century we have seen a tendency towards blurring the lines between the states of war and peace. Wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template. Among such actions are the use of special-operations forces and internal opposition to create a permanently operating front through the entire territory of the enemy state, as well as informational actions, devices, and means that are constantly being perfected."

It is clear that the highly fragmented nature of the US public was brought to a head with the 2016 election in the extremely divisive, contentious outcome and fraught discourse during and after the election. The subsequent public retrospection of what seemed to be shocking external threats to the American election of Donald Trump has been reinforced by a formal investigation of what happened under the direction of Special Counsel Robert Mueller.

The need for answers and a strong public sense of injustice has led to the need for a target, bringing Russia's ongoing efforts into public awareness. Whether there was any direct coordination or just a temporary alignment of interests is still to be determined. What has been achieved is a vast and perhaps exaggerated propaganda victory for Putin and his inner circle.

The Russian leadership group must have seen this as confirmation that its campaign of sowing the seeds of dissension and distrust can be extremely productive, especially against the US which seems to have been far more sensitive and responsive compared with the so-far mixed, limited results of Russia's ongoing interference in the EU and the UK.

What has taken place is a crystallization of the fragmented reality of the US population and how prone it is to outside interference through popular social media platforms.

The following article in the New Yorker titled; 'The fundamental uncertainty of Mueller's Russia indictments' by Masha Gessen, captures these dynamics well :

"To understand what happened in 2016, we have to understand, among other things, how Russians perceived their own efforts. Perhaps the hardest thing for humans to do is to imagine the world as it is imagined by others. We tend to confuse acting in accordance with the goals and values of the society in which we live with rationality; we tend to confuse intelligence with thinking in accordance with those goals and values. And, of course, we are always inclined to see events as predetermined—and we are almost always wrong. An event as shocking as Trump's election demands that the forces that may (or may not) have contributed to his victory be rendered suitably monstrous in retrospect.

The phantom Gerasimov Doctrine, described in Politico as a "new chaos theory of political warfare," sounds more sinister—but also, comfortingly, more serious—than the picture that emerges from the indictment, of Russian agents staging an elaborate production to travel to the United States to gather valuable intelligence, such as advice to "focus their activities on 'purple states like Colorado, Virginia and Florida.'" Americans' apparent need to imagine a Russian adversary as cunning, masterly, and strategic is matched only by the Russians' own belief in a solid, stable, unshakable American society. Stability is what Vladimir Putin has been promising Russians for eighteen years and still hasn't delivered, making Russians all the more resentful of what they imagine as a predictable, safe American society.

Americans, on the other hand, increasingly imagine American society as unstable and deeply at risk. While most people believe themselves to have a solid grip on reality, they imagine their compatriots to be gullible and chronically misinformed. This, in turn, means that we no longer have a sense of shared reality, a common imagination that underlies political life. In a society with a strong sense of shared reality, a bunch of sub-literate tweets and ridiculous ads would be nothing but a curiosity.

It is exceedingly unlikely that we will ever have a clear understanding of whether Russian meddling affected the outcome of the election. But a huge number of Americans imagine that it did. They imagine that exposure to a foreign effort to muddle American politics can fundamentally change the fate of this country—and by imagining it, they render the country all the more muddled, divided, and vulnerable."

What has taken place is a crystallization of the fragmented reality of the US population and how prone it is to outside interference.



To get an understanding of the Russian perspective we can learn something from the Foreign Policy article titled; 'McMaster gives a belated Russian Lesson' by Liesel Schillinger which states:

"Last weekend at the Munich Security Conference, H.R. McMaster, President Trump's now-embattled national security advisor, dropped a heavy-duty cluster of Cyrillic syllables. Referring to the concerted and ongoing Kremlin campaign to influence the American electorate through information warfare, he called it an example of "modern-day maskirova." This was an extremely helpful addition to America's strategic lexicon. Or it will be once Americans understand what it means. (...) ...maskirovka, which itself is a hard-to-translate umbrella term for a range of Soviet-era military strategies intended to confuse and deceive the enemy by misrepresenting reality and masking ("mask" is the etymological root of the word) the nature of the threat that Russian forces represent. Multi front maskirovka allowed Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin's Red Army to destroy the German 6th Army at Stalingrad in 1942 and 1943 by building false airfields and phony bridges to draw German fire (the Soviets staffed the locations with dummy soldiers to confuse reconnaissance), hiding heavy equipment with tarps, disguising an ammunition supply point as a farm village, making tanks look like hay carts, and disseminating fake news by radio, sometimes imitating German channels.

A 1986 report by the U.S. Army Center of Military History described the main point of this tactic: "The Soviets recognized deception as the primary way to achieve surprise. According to the Regulations of the Red Army in 1939, deception involved concealment, simulation, misinformation, and demonstrations or feints. All of these methods were contained in the single Russian word maskirovka. The Soviets have retained this basic definition to the present time."

Although maskirovka came into being as a military term in the 20th century, its tradition has roots that reach back centuries, at least to the reign of Catherine the Great. Legend has it that Catherine's advisor (and lover) Grigory Potemkin wanted the empress to think her victory over conquered lands in the Crimea was more significant than it really was. To convince her of this, he is said to have pinked up phony villages like theater sets along her projected route (not unlike the fake settlements the Red Army built a century and a half later to outfox the Germans) so that when her entourage drove past, she would see in the distance what appeared to be a worthy trophy. Fakery intended to impress has a Russian word of its own: pokazukha, which is part of the maskirovka bag of tricks. Perception, as any good propagandist knows, is reality. And "perception management" via propaganda is the chief weapon of contemporary maskirovka in the Russian espionage playbook.

A cursory inspection of Mueller's Feb. 16 indictment demonstrates that maskirovka is alive and well in Putin's Russia and that it was deployed most effectively in service of helping achieve the November 2016 surprise in the United States: keeping Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton out of the White House. (...) ...a nation that does not acknowledge the presence of maskirovka when the mask is exposed is a nation complicit in its own deception."

It is clear that a habitual deception specialist has found a receptive audience. The time has come to face realities, address the multiple layers of the 'Great Game' that is being played and gain control of the narrative, change perceptions and initiate pushing back across all venues and channels of communication.



THE KEY QUESTION:

What are the optimal US response options at this juncture?

First let's take a look at what led us to this state of affairs and identify the current exact status of the global reality.

With the US and its allies opting to be dragged into increasingly draining (financially & psychologically) wars in the ME, combined with the ongoing consequences of the '07/'08 financial crisis, it has become clear the traditional US led world order is under pressure and its lead actors are being distracted with fractious domestic decision processes.

A vacuum appeared in global affairs as the long standing leadership role of the US was set aside. Nature abhors a vacuum. In political power rivalries, any vacuum that appears will be filled with rival powers. This perceived weakness no doubt has widened opportunities for both China and Russia's increased efforts to carve out their own increased spheres of influence and dominance.

In the Defense Department's 2018 National Defense Strategy Paper it is stated that:

"Today, we are emerging from a period of strategic atrophy, aware that our competitive military advantage has been eroding. We are facing increased global disorder, characterized by decline in the long-standing rules-based international order—creating a security environment more complex and volatile than any we have experienced in recent memory. Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.

China is a strategic competitor using predatory economics to intimidate its neighbors while militarizing features in the South China Sea. Russia has violated the borders of nearby nations and pursues veto power over the economic, diplomatic, and security decisions of its neighbors. As well, North Korea's outlaw actions and reckless rhetoric continue despite United Nation's censure and sanctions. Iran continues to sow violence and remains the most significant challenge to Middle East stability. Despite the defeat of ISIS's physical caliphate, threats to stability remain as terrorist groups with long reach continue to murder the innocent and threaten peace more broadly.

This increasingly complex security environment is defined by rapid technological change, challenges from adversaries in every operating domain, and the impact on current readiness from the longest continuous stretch of armed conflict in our Nation's history. In this environment, there can be no complacency—we must make difficult choices and prioritize what is most important to field a lethal, resilient, and rapidly adapting Joint Force. America's military has no preordained right to victory on the battlefield."

And in the 'Strategic Environment' section it goes on to state:

"The central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the reemergence of long-term, strategic competition by what the National Security Strategy classifies as revisionist powers. It is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model - gaining veto authority over other nations' economic, diplomatic, and security decisions.

China is leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce its neighboring countries to reorder the Indo-Pacific region to their advantage. As China continues its economic and military ascendance, asserting power through an all-of-nation long-term strategy, it will continue to pursue a military modernization program that seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near-term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future.

Concurrently, Russia seeks veto authority over nations on its periphery in terms of their governmental, economic, and diplomatic decisions, to shatter the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and change European and Middle East security and economic structures to its favor. The use of emerging technologies to discredit and subvert democratic processes in Georgia, Crimea, and eastern Ukraine is concern enough, but when coupled with its expanding and modernizing nuclear arsenal the challenge is clear. Both revisionist powers and rogue regimes are competing across all dimensions of power. They have increased efforts short of armed conflict by expanding coercion to new fronts, violating principles of sovereignty, exploiting ambiguity, and deliberately blurring the lines between civil and military goals."

A SUGGESTED PATH FORWARD:

People and nations are more likely to attack rivals if vulnerabilities are seen. Would be attackers cannot know for sure that their target is weak; they depend on the response, or absence of responses seen. They are eager to pursue easy victories, quick and bloodless. That is why such adversaries prey on the vulnerable and weak. When we look at optimal solutions for deterrence, we must look at turning this dynamic around, altering perception of one's own weaknesses and naivety, while sending a message that battles of this kind will no longer be as easy as they had been during recent years.

This requires taking visible actions that will confuse adversaries, making them think they have misread the vulnerabilities of their targets, and that the costs of probing for responses may lead to disproportionately unfavorable outcomes for themselves. Deterrence of war or any other form of conflict essentially requires establishing a perception that the cost of penetration is far higher than defensive and retaliatory measures that can be taken by targeted nations and their peoples.

The first task as a strategist is to widen the framework beyond specific provocations, to view developments in a context of overall relationships among nations and how those developments are evolving in the foreseeable future. To plan for what you want to happen, not for what you wish to happen.

For the US to regain the upper hand it must reframe the battle - shift the conflict to terrain of its choice, altering the pace and stakes to suit it. Maneuver to control the adversaries' minds, pushing their emotional buttons and compelling them to make mistakes.

Everyone has a source of power on which he or she depends. When one is looking at ones rivals, search below the surface for that source, the center of gravity that holds the entire structure together. That center can be their wealth, their popularity, a key position, a winning strategy. Hitting them at the source will always inflict disproportionate pain. In the words of **Carl von Clausewitz:**

“The 1st principle is that the ultimate substance of enemy strength must be traced back to the fewest possible sources, and ideally to one alone. The attack on these sources must be compressed into the fewest possible actions...By constantly seeking out the center of his power, by daring all to win all, will one really defeat the enemy.”



The US must create room to maneuver and present its adversaries with dilemmas. Make every option bad. Constantly work to put them in positions that seem alluring but are traps. Create maximum disorder within their own decision systems. Keep the wheels in constant motion leaving little opportunity for rethinking and regrouping, as one would do in the case of physical conflict of armed forces.

Putin and his circle probably have underestimated American capabilities of disproportionate responses which is what has characterized US historical behavior when confrontations became inevitable. The height of strategic wisdom is to avoid all conflicts and entanglements from which there are no realistic exits. By taking on the US, Putin may have miscalculated and fallen into a conflict from which he has no real exit if the US counters forcefully.

The question is how to fight an elite of centralized authoritarian leadership without openly appearing to be doing so and without harming the general population and becoming a propaganda tool for the elite group to control their own public.

The answer appears to be to pursue multiple fronts to stretch adversaries thin and leverage the US's greater range of powers, turning guerilla warfare principles around and delivering them to devastating outcomes – fighting fire with fire. And in doing so, striking at the center of the perceived strengths of the elite leadership groups, making them look weak and a liability for the majority of the populations and especially the economic elites and their middle class.

However it is important to act rationally, not pursuing strategies which leave the adversary with no viable path of exit. All steps should be considered with firm, aggressive and decisive positioning in private, but with a more encouraging and inclusive framework of discourse in public. It is important to avoid the so-called 'WWI trench warfare' approach in which no one wins, both sides remaining entrenched for long periods until casualties multiply to a point where both sides are incentivized to seek armistice.

Unfortunately the current US Administration's modus operandi appears to be based on this exact approach, focused on publicly antagonizing the opposition with open show of disdain, and making public threats to force adversaries to yield. This approach leaves adversaries no way to resolve disputes with the US without their leaders being seen as backing down to US demands.

This public confrontation approach to problem solving in commercial relations with China in particular will not be conducive to success. When dealing with world powers like Russia and China in establishing a framework for future relations requires establishment of "rules of engagement" that are common in military relationships: What are the boundaries of "tolerable" activities, beyond which hard responses would be considered justified?



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IN CONCLUSION:

It is not clear if the US has the ability or the will to deliver a broad array of counteractions or politically be able overcome the many challenges implicit in execution of such responses. The current US administration has not yet developed the military-security dimensions of what "Make America Great Again" means for interaction with other nations, whether friends or foes.

The National Defense Strategy Paper clearly outlines a reality of ongoing multi-level conflict between the two major 'revisionist powers' and the US and its allies. This truth may be inconvenient to acknowledge publicly but it does not subside and disappear because a choice is made to ignore it.

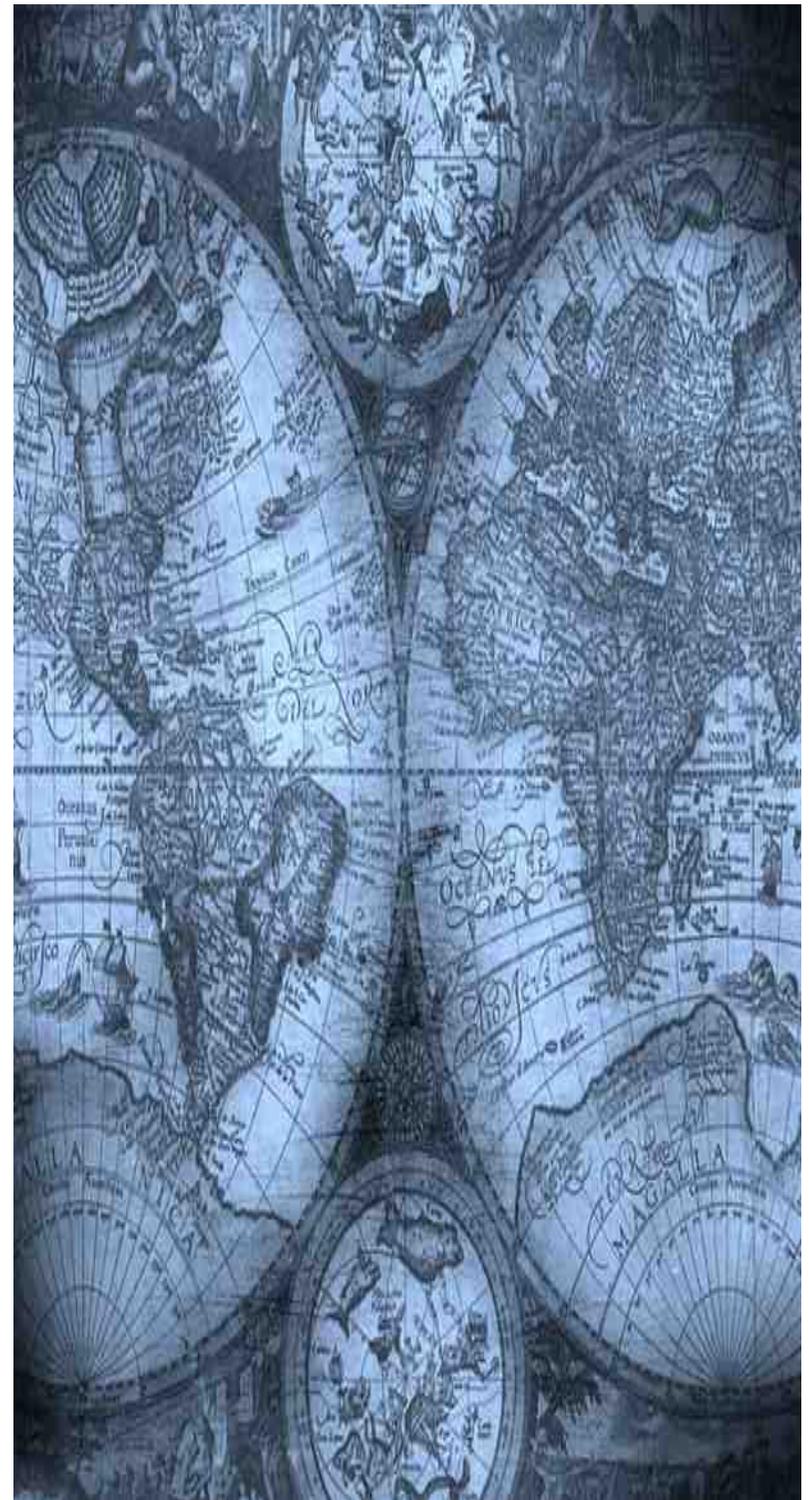
One can hope that the many great institutions, and their loyal competent people that make up the full scope of US power will find ways to deliver effectively a comprehensive counter strategy, even if politicians seem lost playing domestic politics of personal and partisan rivalry.

From a broader perspective, as outlined in the RAND Corporation report titled: 'Testing the value of the Postwar International Order.' It is clear that a continuation of an engaged US leading from the front is to the benefit of the majority of the world and is worth fighting for. As stated in the conclusion of the report:

"These findings represent a qualified but still powerful endorsement of the essential American conception of its role in the world. Support for a form of world order, both as an instrumental tool to safeguard American interests and as a collective effort to shape a better future, is part of the American ethos. While the form of the U.S. global role has evolved, these principles have reflected a particularly American expression of international interests. That the postwar variety of this endeavor has measurably contributed to those interests reemphasizes the continuing relevance of this quintessentially American vision.

Henry Kissinger argued in his most recent book, World Order, that "Any system of world order, to be sustainable, must be accepted as just." Power without moral legitimacy will create antibodies and eventually fail; morality without power is ineffectual."

Powerful words to be heeded and a principle to be ascertained through a position of strength but with a spirit of collaboration in pursuit of a more reflective global framework that can be seen as just and built around shared values.



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