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A 'Crowe Memorandum' for the twenty-first century: Preparing for intensified geopolitical competition

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Foreword

As Chair of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, I am always on the lookout for new work that helps me understand the challenges our country and likeminded partners face in the twenty-first century. My committee has focused extensively on the threat posed by authoritarian states, not least China and Russia. We are compelled to better understand how their behaviour undermines our allies and partners – even ourselves. Russia’s actions in Salisbury remain to this day an international crime and outrage.

This paper, by James Rogers and Alexander Lanoszka, helps us to appreciate the nature of the challenge authoritarian states pose to the international community. To do so, they invoke Sir Eyre Crowe’s famous memorandum on the geopolitical state of Europe in 1907. Filling the boots of such a foresightful analyst is always difficult, but their take – drafted just over a century later – is worthy of attention.

Their starting assumption is that great power competition needs to be properly categorised to be better understood based on whether authoritarian regimes seek to replace or degrade the prevailing international order. This aids understanding of the consequences of China and Russia’s action. Their recommendations are also challenging: they argue that democratic nations – whether in the Euro-Atlantic or Indo-Pacific – need to work together to resist authoritarians through a scaled-up and broadened strategy of deterrence.

This is clearly a challenge for our generation and the thinking in this paper will go some way to helping us and, I hope, allies to think about how we can cooperate to defend the values that matter to us all.

Tom Tugendhat MP

*Chair of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee
House of Commons*



Executive summary

1. In December 2020, Gen. Sir Nicholas Carter, Chief of the Defence Staff, asked for a new 'Long Telegram' to help free and open nations compete.
2. Better strategic guidance, however, might come by way of Sir Eyre Crowe's 1907 Memorandum, which aimed to thwart aggressive powers.
3. Today the United Kingdom needs an approach similar to Sir Eyre's, not least because of the revisionism of China and Russia.
4. These powers, ruled by authoritarian regimes, fear the free and open international system, just as they fear democracy.
5. To deter them, Britain needs to integrate the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific zones into a wider 'Atlantic-Pacific' and encourage the largest democracies to cooperate in support of the peace.



1.0 Introduction

What's needed is a catalyst somewhat like George Kennan's "long telegram" in which he observed that peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union in 1946 was unlikely to work. This led to the Truman Doctrine of containment and which provided the basis of US and Western strategy throughout the Cold War.

Those are the words of General Sir Nicholas Carter, the Chief of the Defence Staff, at his annual lecture at the Royal United Services Institute in December 2020.¹ Since publication in 1947, the 'Long Telegram' has achieved legendary status:² although academics had developed similar recommendations only two years previously, George Kennan, the Deputy Chief of Mission at the United States (US) Embassy in Moscow, is widely credited as having given intellectual expression to the geostrategy of containment.³ The document came from the right place at the right time: just as the Soviet Union began to show its true colours in the aftermath of the Second World War.

However, from a British perspective, the 1907 'Memorandum on the Present State of British Relations with France and Germany' may provide a better starting point for geostrategic thinking about contemporary challenges.⁴ Drafted by Sir Eyre Crowe, then Senior Clerk in the Western Department in the Foreign Office, the 'Memo' explained that a firmer British strategy was needed towards Berlin in light of Imperial Germany's increasingly invasive geostrategic approach. Like Kennan's masterpiece, the Memo – over 16,000 words in length – also had influence, but not necessarily of the kind its author hoped. Although the Memo likely shaped the thinking of Sir Edward Grey, then Foreign Secretary, it did not lead to the decisive change in British foreign policy that Sir Eyre desired. It is now for counterfactual historians to debate whether the history of the twentieth century might

¹ Nicholas Carter, Speech: 'Chief of Defence Staff speech RUSI Annual lecture', Ministry of Defence, 17/12/20, <https://bit.ly/codssral> (found: 01/03/2021).

² Peter Edidin, 'The Man Who Took the Measure of the Communist Threat', *The New York Times*, 20/03/2005, <http://nyti.ms/303rudx> (found: 01/03/2021).

³ For the initial geostrategy of containment, see: Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York City: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1944).

⁴ Eyre Crowe, 'Memorandum on the Present State of British Relations with France and Germany', *Wikisource*, 01/01/1907, <http://bit.ly/motpsorwfag> (found: 01/03/2021).



have turned out differently had the then Foreign Secretary adopted an approach less like a broker and more like the aligner that Sir Eyre argued that the UK should have been.

What is important is that Sir Eyre's Memo might be more suitable than Kennan's telegram for contemporary geopolitical challenges. True, both documents set out to explain the geostrategic situation faced by their respective governments. Both identified a revisionist protagonist. Both counselled for a dynamic deterrence posture, drawing off their individual states' vast resources – in Sir Eyre's case, the UK, and Kennan's, the US. And both saw in their opponents a hostility matched only by their determination. But Sir Eyre drafted his memo to deal with a rapidly expanding terrestrial power, while Kennan drafted his telegram to deal with one that had already become highly over-extended – a consequence of the Second World War.

This 'New Crowe Memo' is offered to the UK, as well as other free and open nations, to help generate a new geostrategic approach fit for the twenty-first century. The biggest challenge facing such countries is authoritarian revisionism, which aims to alter or spoil the prevailing geopolitical order. Since the end of the Second World War, free and open nations, such as the UK, the US, Canada, Australia, Japan, and certain European countries, have put this order together. The twentieth century showed that deterrence works more effectively than accommodation or acquiescence; whereas the leading democracies failed to prevent German revisionism in the early twentieth century, they successfully stood up to the Soviet Union. Today, the free and open international order needs their support – from both sides of Eurasia – to withstand China and Russia's malign and revisionist pressure.



2.0 The nature of the revisionist challenge

Several leading democracies have identified ‘wider state’ or ‘great power’ competition as the pre-eminent strategic challenge of the age, marking a considerable departure from the post-Cold War period when extremism, terrorism, and failed and failing states were emphasised.⁵ But as much as this change of focus is correct, the major democracies have been unable to distinguish between the principal competitors and forms of competition. Of these, China and Russia are the most significant, though each poses a very different revisionist challenge, born of their differing national capabilities and geographic locations:

- **Capability:** Of the two, China poses the most extensive threat: not since Wilhelminian Germany in the early twentieth century has a revisionist state held such relative material power – or potential. Russia, although far weaker, still presents a significant local challenge as it wields sufficient relative strength to undermine its smaller and weaker neighbours, even those which are, through the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), under American and British nuclear protection.
- **Geography:** Due to China and Russia’s different locations, the geopolitical challenge is increasingly broad and comprehensive. China, with both continental and maritime frontiers, is a ‘hybrid’ power. At the same time, Russia is primarily a European terrestrial power. It is hemmed in to the north by the frigid expanses of the Arctic, and its outlets into the Mediterranean, Baltic and Japan seas can be easily blocked.

Consequently, free and open nations face, simultaneously, two radically different revisionist powers, forcing them to focus on Eastern Europe and South-East Asia at the same time. The last time they faced two geopolitically-different revisionists was during the late 1930s and

⁵ In the ‘National Security Capability Review the UK embraced the term ‘wider state competition’ while the US National Security Strategy adopted ‘great power competition’. See: ‘National Security Capability Review’, Cabinet Office, 2017, <http://bit.ly/nscr2018> (found: 01/03/2021) and ‘National Security Strategy of the United States’, White House, 12/2017, <http://bit.ly/nssotus2017> (found: 01/03/2021).



early 1940s, when Nazi Germany lorded over continental Europe and Militarist Japan's navy dominated the Western Pacific.

These differences in national capabilities and assets combine in such a way as to render the character of China's and Russia's behaviour to be qualitatively different. China's offensive is *counter*-systemic, whereas Russia's approach is *anti*-systemic. With its superior power base, China is acquiring the means to challenge the regional, even global, system. In contrast, Russia, the 'poor man' of the great powers, seeks to degrade the prevailing order, not least in the Euro-Atlantic space. This critical distinction further complicates the nature of the revisionist challenge.

2.1 China's counter-systemic offensive

Over the past decade, the scale of China's economic modernisation has astonished the world. With over 1.3 billion people and the world's third-largest territory, China has the potential to meet the leading democracies as a genuine economic peer. It has invested heavily in upgrading its national communications infrastructure to the extent that it now has more motorways and high-speed railways than any other country. China's construction spree has been so prodigious that it now has 20% more high-speed track than the rest of the world put together and is responsible for 40% of the high-speed line being laid down globally.⁶ By linking itself together, China has accelerated its industrial modernisation: it produces over 50% of the world's steel, over 50% of the world's vehicles, and accounts for almost 30% of global computer exports.⁷ China now has a larger economic yield than the Soviet Union managed at its height relative to the United States during

⁶ 'High Speed lines in the World', International Union of Railways, 27/02/2020, <http://bit.ly/hslitw> (found: 01/03/2021).

⁷ See: 'World crude steel production, 2020', World Steel Association, 27/01/2020, <http://bit.ly/wcsp2020> (found: 01/03/2021); 'Car production', Organisation Internationale des Constructeurs d'Automobiles, 01/12.2020, <http://bit.ly/wmvpbcoica> (found: 01/03/2021); and Jonathan Woetzel *et al*, 'China and the world', McKinsey Global Institute, 01/07/2019, <http://bit.ly/catwitdoacr> (found: 01/03/2021).



the Cold War.⁸ And with a GNI per capita of US\$10,410,⁹ China looks set to transition into ‘high-income economy’ status (US\$12,536 per capita) over the next decade.¹⁰

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is ever keen to highlight its success in reducing extreme poverty – defined as the ratio of the population living on US\$1.90 per day – from over 65% in 1990 to less than 0.5% today.¹¹ Notwithstanding the level of environmental damage, China’s modernisation has been remarkable. China has, however, unlike Taiwan, defied expectations that it would liberalise as it grew wealthier. Despite limited reforms during the late 1990s and 2000s, the CCP has clung tenaciously to its position as China’s supreme authority. Moreover, since the CCP appointed Xi Jinping as General Secretary in 2012, the regime has tightened its grip, abolishing the ten year limit on the General Secretary’s time in office. It has achieved a level of intrusiveness of which ‘Big Brother’ in George Orwell’s dystopian novel 1984 would be proud. Besides incarcerating around one million Uyghurs in forced labour camps in Xinjiang, it has created a ‘social credit system’ to enable authorities to track Chinese citizens’ behaviour and punish them for misdemeanours, encouraging a Panopticon-like system of self-surveillance. These costly totalitarian measures show just how afraid the Communist Party is of social and political change in China, as well as how far it may go to retain power.

Indeed, China’s growing economic power base and increasingly repressive regime have come together to produce a power of significant size, reach and determination. A generous observer might conclude that there is nothing especially untoward here. Like other countries before it, China is merely adjusting its international ambitions to match its newfound economic position. Though the Communist Party has

⁸ According to the Central Intelligence Agency, the Soviet economy peaked at 57% of the US economy in 1975. See: ‘A Comparison of the US and Soviet economic systems: Evaluating the performance of the Soviet system’, Central Intelligence Agency, 10/1985, <http://bit.ly/acotuaseetpotss> (found: 01/03/2021). Today, China’s economy is 66% the size of the US economy. See: ‘GDP (current US\$)’, World Bank, 2020, <http://bit.ly/gdpcucu2019> (found: 01/03/2021).

⁹ ‘GNI per capita, Atlas method (current US\$) – China’, World Bank, 28/04/2020, <http://bit.ly/gpcamc2019> (found: 01/03/2021).

¹⁰ ‘World Bank Country and Lending Groups’, World Bank, 28/02/2021, <http://bit.ly/wbcalg2021> (found: 01/03/2021).

¹¹ See: ‘Poverty headcount ratio at \$1.90 a day (2011 PPP) (% of population) – China’, World Bank, 2021, <http://bit.ly/phcra19oad> (found: 01/03/2021) and James T. Areddy, ‘China Says It Has Met Its Deadline of Eliminating Poverty’, *Wall Street Journal*, 23/11/2020, <http://bit.ly/csihmidoep> (found: 01/03/2021).



ramped-up military spending by some 558% since 1999, and the People's Liberation Army's naval component – the People's Liberation Army Navy – has grown dramatically, it has not yet become a 'blue water' navy.¹² China's relative military expenditure is also still less than that of the United States.¹³ Therefore, such an observer might conclude that the CCP still clings to Deng Xiaoping's advice 'to keep a low profile' (*Taoguang Yanghui*).

However, this argument has an obvious flaw: China, having grown in power, has compounded its claim to democratic Taiwan, reasserted control over Hong Kong and elbowed surrounding countries, not least those that sit adjacent to the South China Sea, out of the way. In no other area has China's revisionism become so visible, focused, and sustained. Since the early 2010s, Beijing has attempted to 'continentalise' the South China Sea by constructing an array of extensive military facilities, often on artificial islands built at great expense by dredging up sand from the seabed.¹⁴ Starting on Hainan Island next to the Chinese mainland, China has positioned these facilities to project power down into the South China Sea, covering it with overlapping 'fields of fire' – an intricate lattice of so-called 'anti-access' and 'area-denial' systems.¹⁵

Some may argue that, from Beijing's standpoint, Taiwan and Hong Kong are merely wayward parts of China, and military facilities in the South China Sea simply extend China's security perimeter, not least to protect the maritime communication lines that fuel the Chinese economy with oil, gas and raw materials from Africa and the Middle East. The problem here is that the Taiwanese – having become a dynamic self-determining people in their own right – have a right to reject the CCP's advances. Meanwhile, China's re-assertion of arbitrary control over Hong Kong has dishonoured the Sino-British Treaty of 1984, considered by many as a litmus test for Beijing's intentions. Finally, continentalisation in the South China Sea has infringed on the security of surrounding countries by subverting the United Nations

¹² 'Military expenditure by country, in constant (2018) US\$ m., 1988–2019', 2020, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, <http://bit.ly/msbc2018> (found: 01/03/2021).

¹³ 'Military expenditure by country as percentage of gross domestic product, 1988–2019', Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2020, <http://bit.ly/mebcapog2019> (found: 01/03/2021).

¹⁴ Andrew Lambert, *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires and the Conflict that Made the Modern World* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2018), p. 320.

¹⁵ Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, 'Future Warfare in the Western Pacific', *International Security*, 41:1 (2016), pp. 7–48.



Convention on the Law of the Sea, the international legal framework – which Beijing helped to devise in the 1980s and ratified in 1996 – that regulates the legality of maritime claims and jurisdictions.

Only one conclusion is possible: the development of China's domestic economy, its growing authoritarianism, and its expansionist international approach all intersect. Just as it has bound China under its hegemony, the CCP seeks to use China's growing power base to extend its power into the wider world. Consequently, adjacent countries like Taiwan and those surrounding the South China Sea are hectored and bullied with China's increasingly assertive military and coastguard. But even regional primacy is not enough for Beijing. As the CCP has grown in power, it has extended its reach further with the so-called 'Belt and Road' initiative, the quaint euphemism for an opaque thirty-plus year £800 billion project to build multiple communication lines and nodes of Chinese influence across much of central and southern Eurasia – described as 'globalisation with Chinese characteristics'.¹⁶ Beijing pursues this project with all available means, including discursive, economic, and military elements of national power, often employed in subtle and sophisticated ways. The cohesion and integration of China are thus pursued symbiotically alongside Beijing's broader counter-systemic project. This seeks to supplant the free and open order with a new authoritarian hierarchy, not unlike China itself, whereby the CCP stands above and beyond all other actors, which are allotted positions beneath it.

2.2 *Russia's anti-systemic offensive*

Under Vladimir Putin's leadership, Russia represents an anti-systemic challenge to Britain and its Euro-Atlantic partners. Russia's current trajectory differs significantly from that of China since it does not have the same potential for generating wealth. In fact, Russia's economic output is 44% smaller than the United Kingdom's, despite having over double the population.¹⁷ Russia's economic misfortune is a legacy of the Soviet system. Emerging from the Soviet Union's collapse alongside fourteen other new states, Russia endured financial disarray and political crisis in its first post-communist decade. Its situation

¹⁶ Charles Parton, 'Belt and Road is globalisation with Chinese characteristics', *Financial Times*, 03/10/2018, <http://bit.ly/barigwcc> (found: 01/03/2021).

¹⁷ 'GDP (current US\$) – Russian Federation, United Kingdom', World Bank, 2020, <http://bit.ly/gcurfuk> (found: 01/03/2021).



improved thanks partly to the high oil and natural gas prices that would propel its economic growth during Putin's first presidential stint. Simultaneously, however, Putin centralised power in the Kremlin, using the levers of state power to force out unpopular oligarchs just as a new kleptocratic political class loyal to him began to emerge.¹⁸ With the political opposition effectively neutered, the Kremlin increased its military spending while defence budgets across Europe stagnated.

Since the mid-2000s, the Kremlin has embarked upon an aggressive but opportunistic foreign policy that has stoked insecurity among its neighbours and put itself at increasing variance with liberal norms and values. In 2007, organisations likely based in Russia launched distributed denial of service attacks that targeted Estonian institutions and web services. Russia's August 2008 war with Georgia was partly over Moscow's role in abetting the separatism of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. To this day, Russian armed forces encroach upon Georgian territory while providing military and political aid to those two regions. Still, the Kremlin's boldest move was to seize the peninsula of Crimea in 2014, shortly after the Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych fled Kyiv for Russia during the Maidan Revolution. This territorial annexation was the first in Europe since 1945. Thereafter armed groups supported by Russia began to agitate in the Donbas region for independence. Amidst these hostilities, a Russian surface-to-air missile downed a civilian aircraft, killing all of its crew and passengers. The Kremlin has hampered the investigation by spreading disinformation and withholding critical pieces of evidence. War in the Donbas has continued ever since, resulting in over 13,000 dead. Russia still does not acknowledge fully its direct role.¹⁹

Tensions between Russia and NATO sharpened following these events. NATO members located on its so-called northeastern flank – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland – feared that they could be Russia's next targets for aggression. Giving some substance to those anxieties is how those countries have, since 2014, experienced numerous airspace violations by Russian aircraft and have been targeted by disinformation campaigns and malicious cyber operations. They have also come within ranges of new missile systems – including

¹⁸ Karen Dawish, *Putin's kleptocracy: who owns Russia?* (New York City: Simon and Schuster, 2014).

¹⁹ Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, *Annual Report 2016–2017*, 2017, pp. 51–52.



banned ranges by the now-defunct Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty – that could decouple them from their western allies. Russian government officials have clumsily threatened military strikes on neighbouring countries.²⁰ Indeed, Russia's adherence to arms control is suspect, especially with regards to chemical weapons. In 2006, a former officer of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) – Alexander Litvinenko – was fatally poisoned with polonium-210 in London several years after fleeing Russia amid a public spat with the FSB's leadership. The Novichok poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal on British territory – and that of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny – further reminded free and open nations of the level of the threat. Further afield, the Kremlin began openly backing populist politicians in Europe. It engaged in election interference, most notably in the United States. Of course, any popularity that these populists might have had is very likely not due to Russian conniving. Yet the Kremlin seems to feel emboldened in taking these actions. It can play spoiler.

Unlike China, Russia does not appear to pursue a counter-systemic project at the global level. The Kremlin certainly fosters regional integration in Central Asia (and Belarus) through the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation. It promotes specific socially conservative values, aligning itself, to a certain extent, with the Russian Orthodox Church while becoming more authoritarian at home over the last decade. Like the CCP, Putin and those around him distrust liberalism and object to British and allied foreign policy. Hence the support extended to European politicians like France's Marine Le Pen and Hungary's Viktor Orbán. Yet little desire seems to exist on the Kremlin's part to fashion alternative international institutions that could supplant or even compete with the free and open international order. Even though its demographic problems are much exaggerated, Russia's growth trajectory limits such ambitions. But, as its malign activities in Ukraine and elsewhere indicate, the Kremlin need not have to catch up to pose problems.

A popular argument that has gained currency is that Russia has legitimate grievances against the free and open international order. Mistakes have indeed been made: the shock therapy that London and Washington supported in Russia, for example, was insensitive to local

²⁰ See: 'Russia threatens to aim nuclear missiles at Denmark ships if it joins NATO shield', *Reuters*, 22/03/2015, <http://bit.ly/rttanmadsijns> (found: 01/03/2021).



conditions, was pernicious for ordinary Russians, and benefited only a few. Nevertheless, many observers have overstated how such developments as NATO enlargement have alienated the Kremlin. Regardless of whether (unwritten) promises not to enlarge NATO eastwards were made, losing the Cold War and experiencing the collapse of the Soviet Union would have always been a grievance. The newest members of NATO were never Russia's to claim as its own given the imperial manner in which they were absorbed into the Soviet bloc in the first place. Its nuclear arsenal and conventional military power assure Russia of its territorial integrity and ability to project much more military power in the Baltic littoral region than NATO can. Putin himself has offered contradictory views on NATO enlargement.²¹ More pointedly, Moscow has agency in international affairs and does not merely react based on past events. The interests of the Kremlin, with its current leadership, are authoritarian and kleptocratic, thereby guiding much of its behaviour into the present.

²¹ On NATO's legacy, see Alexander Lanoszka, 'Thank Goodness for NATO Enlargement', *International Politics*, 57:3 (2020), pp. 451–470.



3.0 Pushing back against counter- and anti-systemic challengers

The free and open international system is once again under attack, this time from two different powers, coming from two different geopolitical directions, using two different offensive strategies. Still, much is common between China and Russia since they are both in the grip of repressive authoritarian regimes that see the international order's openness as a weakness and liberal democracy as a threat. The UK is a key target because it is a custodian of this order, arguably second only to the US in its ability and determination to protect its allies and partners.

That the UK favours a free and open international order is a matter of enlightened self-interest. It has long been a 'natural law' of British geostrategic policy to prevent authoritarian powers from dominating their neighbours, particularly in Europe.²² As a small island country off the coast of the European continent and dependent on the sea for food and commerce, the UK can ill-afford to allow its maritime communication lines and independence to come under threat. Consequently, the UK has, in the words of Sir Eyre Crowe, always had 'a direct and positive interest in the maintenance of the independence of nations'; it has been 'the natural enemy of any country threatening the independence of others' to the extent that it is 'the natural protector of the weaker communities'.²³ For this reason, the UK will remain wedded to the security of its smaller neighbours, but its maritime interests – often global in scope – compel it to protect partners from distant expansionist aggressors.

However, large revisionist powers pose a menace to their adversaries in ways that arguably differ from in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. Although limited territorial conquests like Russia's annexation of Crimea have remained a continuous feature of international politics, many policymakers and strategists have grappled with how warfare, and thus some of the strategies and tactics

²² Winston Churchill, *The Gathering Storm* (New York City: Rosetta Books, 2002 [1948]), pp. 186–187.

²³ Eyre Crowe, 'Memorandum on the Present State of British Relations with France and Germany', *Wikisource*, 01/01/1907, <http://bit.ly/motpsorwfag> (found: 01/03/2021).



used by adversaries, might be changing. The prospect of large armoured columns rumbling across internationally recognised boundaries to take whole countries remains a serious enough threat. However, the Pax Atomica has rendered this less of a challenge than in the past. To describe this change, new terms have been developed to account for supposedly new forms of warfare and new types of strategies, with ‘hybrid war’ and ‘grey zone conflict’ being the most popular examples.²⁴ The former, emphasising the broad array of instruments used to gain advantage during geopolitical competition, is a more instrumental depiction, whereas the latter, focused on the locations of fighting – between war and peace – is more concerned with the location of fighting. A ‘new cold war’ has also been declared and on more than one occasion.²⁵

Such terms have led to confusion. ‘Hybrid war’ and ‘grey zone conflict’ give a misleading account of adversaries’ operational codes and military strategies. Meanwhile, ‘cold war’ has its own baggage because it conjures up, appropriately or not, the history of the specific struggle between the Soviet bloc and the Western democracies.

Yet, irrespective of their utility, these terms are efforts to make sense of how anti- and counter-systemic revisionism plays out in the current international environment – one that is marked by several paradoxical features. If stripped of its historical connotations, ‘cold war’ accounts for great power struggle whereby at least two sides are armed with nuclear weapons, which some argue can restrain military conflict at the strategic level (the Pax Atomica) while, paradoxically, encouraging aggressive action – including proxy wars – at lower levels or different sectors.²⁶ Another relates to the proliferation of international humanitarian law, which can discourage egregious violations of human rights but at the same time incentivise countries to refrain from openly declaring war so that their leaders can avoid being persecuted in international courts. Hence they might be more likely to engage in forms of statecraft that are more covert and may lend some plausible deniability to their actions. Finally, advances in computing technologies have given rise to the cyber domain in which interstate conflict can unfold anew. However, the premium put on secrecy can at

²⁴ Frank G. Hoffman, ‘Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges’, *PRISM*, 08/11/2018, <http://bit.ly/ecfocgzahc> (found: 01/03/2021).

²⁵ Robert D. Kaplan, ‘A New Cold War Has Begun’, *Foreign Policy*, 01/07/2019, <http://bit.ly/ancowahb> (found: 01/03/2021).

²⁶ David H. Cole, *Imperial Military Geography* (London: Sifton Praed and Co., Ltd., 1956), p. 3.



once give cover for attackers while blunting their ability to coerce if no clear and attributable political demands are made.

What this means is that insofar as at least two powerful competitors are dissatisfied with their position in the prevailing order, they will likely push ahead with their anti- and counter-systemic offensives, especially where they meet little resistance. Of the two, China, due to its superior material power, is likely to pose the most significant challenge, which will be decidedly more global in orientation. However, Russia's anti-systemic focus on the Euro-Atlantic region is still hazardous, mainly because it seeks to drive a wedge between continental European democracies and their Atlantic allies and splinter one of the critical power bases – NATO – behind the free and open order.

In this environment, leading democracies such as the UK have two options: resistance or acquiescence. They can deploy their power in defence of the free and open order, or they can retrench until their weaker allies and partners come under threat. If they choose to resist the ambitions of the authoritarian revisionists, competition will almost certainly intensify. But nuclear weapons, alongside ever more precise conventional delivery systems and cyber forces, make direct military escalation an increasingly unpalatable idea, even more so, perhaps, than during the (first) cold war with the Soviet Union. The new technologies also make escalation more and more unpredictable, particularly in a multipolar world where the great powers are waxing and waning. Indeed, the pressure not to escalate militarily compounds the spread of aggressive activities to other sectors or geographical regions and escalation involving the integration of covert and overt forms of state power. As conflict intensifies and broadens into different sectors and regions under the Pax Atomica, it results in perpetual competition – essentially a new cold war.²⁷

Under these circumstances, preservationist powers should initiate two strategic responses: firstly, accept that victory is unlikely – even if the authoritarian regimes of Russia and China fall, they will not necessarily be replaced by anything better; and, secondly, look to deterrence as a strategic guide. Credible deterrence compels democracies to employ and project power more effectively and determinedly than their adversaries. As the Integrated Operating

²⁷ Hal Brands, 'The Art of Long-Term Competition', *The Washington Quarterly*, 41:4 (2018), pp. 31–51.



Concept recognises, due to the nature of the revisionist challenge, effective deterrence has to be pursued across multiple levels, not only the traditional military plane.²⁸ Deterrence has to be pursued on the highest plane – geostrategically – and at all subordinate levels, including discursive, political, military, and economic. Deterrence could involve actively positioning military or diplomatic assets on friendly territory to strengthen the first line of response. It could also include developing power projection capabilities to cut response times and to curb hostile action. Appropriately crafted, a deterrence strategy would buttress the free and open international order and discourage authoritarian revisionists, especially when their objectives are illegitimate or predatory.

To be sure, adopting a preservationist deterrent strategy does not necessarily preclude engagement – even cooperation – with revisionist powers. Still, democracies should uphold their red lines and respond when they are close to being crossed. Free and open nations also must be aware of being duped: a revisionist may promise to cooperate on one issue – such as climate change – to encourage acquiescence and de-escalation in another.

To intensify their deterrence posture, Britain and other free and open nations would do well to:

3.1 Expand the geographic vision of the free and open international order

Though the free and open international system needs to move beyond the Euro-Atlantic area, strategists and policymakers should avoid being coaxed into accepting the Japanese- and American-inspired ‘Indo-Pacific’ geopolitical vision. This does not mean the Indo-Pacific should be scorned. It does mean that, insofar as China’s revisionist geostrategy looks west across Eurasia towards Eastern and Southeastern Europe, the Indo-Pacific, as a geopolitical organising concept, has already been outgrown. As Indo-Pacific countries look west and Euro-Atlantic countries look east, the two theatres are being drawn into an even broader geopolitical system – an ‘Atlantic-Pacific’ – not so dissimilar to Nicholas Spykman’s visionary ‘rimland’ around

²⁸ ‘The Integrated Operating Concept 2025’, Ministry of Defence, 30/09/2020, <https://bit.ly/ioc2025> (found: 01/03/2021).



the southern underbelly of Eurasia.²⁹ Whether located in the Euro-Atlantic or the Indo-Pacific, this is the geopolitical mindset free and open nations ought to embrace. Until both theatres are seen as one, the leading democracies will remain myopic and ineffective, and their revisionist adversaries will continue to undermine them.

3.2 Realign free and open nations

In keeping with the Atlantic-Pacific's emergence, attempts to uphold a free and open order, whether in the Euro-Atlantic or the Indo-Pacific, need to be aligned. Despite Russia's anti-systemic action, NATO has shown that it can deter threats to the free and open order in the Euro-Atlantic space. This order was established because the democratic victors in the Second World War realised that institutionalised cooperation was needed to realign preservationist countries so that they could resist Soviet pressure, resulting in the most effective alliance in modern history. The situation is different in the Indo-Pacific, where China, today's counter-systemic revisionist, like Imperial Germany before it, is an expanding power. Although Australia, India, Japan and the US have formed groupings like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, they have failed to institutionalise their efforts to the extent that a countervailing coalition takes hold.

Meanwhile, the rise of India, South Korea and Australia – as well as Chile and Malaysia – as liberal democracies merely compounds this need. India is already a larger economy than Canada, Italy, and France, while South Korea and Australia may soon rival Canada and Italy economically. If existing institutions that draw the leading democracies together cannot adapt to reflect new realities, they will decline in influence, reducing the democracies' ability to coordinate their efforts. This is why the UK's attempt to form a so-called D10 from the G7 – to include India, South Korea and Australia – makes geostrategic sense, as do efforts by the US to host a summit for democracy. Besides these initiatives, NATO could develop an Atlantic-Pacific Council to consult with critical Indo-Pacific allies, while the UK and France could attend summits of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue.³⁰

²⁹ Nicholas J. Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt and Brace Ltd., 1944), pp. 40–41.

³⁰ John Hemmings and James Rogers, 'Britain and the Quadrilateral', *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 3:5 (2020), pp. 118–130.

3.3 Assert red lines unflinchingly

Just as Sir Eyre knew that Imperial Germany's autocratic monarchy would exploit British equivocation and indecision, contemporary authoritarian regimes are little different. However, military and diplomatic escalation arguably operate more subtly today than in the early twentieth century. As the costs and risks of launching a traditional military attack are unacceptably high, a rival might ratchet up pressure in a different domain by engaging in, for example, cyber or political warfare. This does not mean that free and open nations should be less indisposed to escalate or take action when their red lines are crossed. On the contrary, a forceful response to a revisionist's infraction should be pursued. Since it could temper conflict by providing a reminder of the risks involved with hostile action, it may not even provoke an even more forceful counter-response. It may sound counter-intuitive, but when their red lines are crossed, democracies should not be afraid to 'put a bit of stick about', even if their response is not immediate but carefully calibrated to punish an aggressor.³¹

Besides political will, capability is necessary for asserting red lines. In the military domain, one area is in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance so as to improve monitoring and early detection. This would make it harder for adversaries to pull surprises or to claim plausible deniability when undertaking malicious actions below the threshold for war. The US is already doing this in Poland with a squadron of Reaper drones, but the UK could also be involved in Eastern Europe and over the Norwegian Sea given its regional presence in both theatres. Other vital capabilities are worthy of investment. The British Army has let long-range fires atrophy since the Cold War ended, but these capabilities may prove useful in boosting local deterrence and defence in Europe.³² The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan was a reminder of the utility of short-range air defences and electronic warfare capabilities – capabilities that the British Army has also neglected, while Iranian activities in the Gulf have shown what happens when the fleet is run down. By reinvigorating the British Armed Forces' war-fighting potential, adversaries may be

³¹ This was the term used by Sir Francis Urquhart, the Chief Whip, in the BBC television series 'House of Cards' (1990).

³² Jack Watling, 'The Future of Fires', Royal United Services Institute, 01/11/2019, <http://bit.ly/tfofmtutaof> (found: 01/03/2021).



less likely to offer a challenge. And if they do, then the UK will be in a better position to respond.

Yet affirming red lines in the non-military domain is arguably even more important. Doing so ensures that conflict remains limited so that adversaries are not emboldened to undertake overt aggression. If Russia or China pursue activities in the cyber domain that are hostile to the UK, like the data breaches that the US has recently suffered (e.g., SolarWinds), the UK should not hesitate to exercise, as appropriate, retaliatory cyber options and to engage in efforts to degrade the ability of hostile cyber actors in undertaking future intrusions. In light of violations of arms control agreement, as with Russia's dubious record with the Chemical Weapons Convention,³³ naming, shaming, as well as targeted economic sanctions in coordination with allies and partners should at the very least underpin the UK's response.

3.4 Improve national resilience

Authoritarian revisionists can and will try to exploit free and open nations from within. They can broadcast disinformation campaigns under the guise of free speech and collect intelligence with greater ease, thanks to the access that liberal democracies, by their very nature provide. Governments of free and open nations may thus attempt to curb individual freedoms to neutralise such threats. Yet this approach would be self-defeating: liberal democracies like the UK can provide a beacon of hope as well as a magnet to those living under authoritarian rule. Their political legitimacy can frustrate autocrats aspiring to discredit liberal democracy and justify their own corrupt hold on power.

To defend against these challenges, rather than succumb to authoritarian temptations, cultivating domestic resilience is vital. Improving media literacy, raising awareness of espionage threats, and ensuring a strong and dynamic civil society is integral. Such actions can help defeat disinformation campaigns, alert citizens to potential political subversion from abroad, and limit the toxicity that partisan differences and extremist ideologies can stir. More specifically, British investment and tax laws could be tightened to restrict money laundering and the movement of illicit money coming from abroad, especially from Russia and China. Too much suspicious money is

³³ Julia Masteron, 'Novichok used in Russia, OPCW finds', *Arms Control Today*, 11/2020, <http://bit.ly/nuirusof> (found: 01/03/2021).



behind many property purchases in London and elsewhere, with one outcome being hollowed out neighbourhoods as local residents cannot contend with rising housing values. The resulting inequality can be destabilising for civil society and democratic politics. Adversaries not only acquire potentially ill-gotten flats but also can benefit from a British polity weakened from within.

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Notes

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