

# Thinking About Great Power Competition

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# The Return of Great Powers

- “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.” *National Defense Strategy, 2018.*

# What is competition?

- “Competition does not always mean hostility, nor does it inevitably lead to conflict—although none should doubt our commitment to defend our interests. An America that successfully competes is the best way to prevent conflict. Just as American weakness invites challenge, American strength and confidence deters war and promotes peace.” *National Security Strategy 2018*

# Policy implications

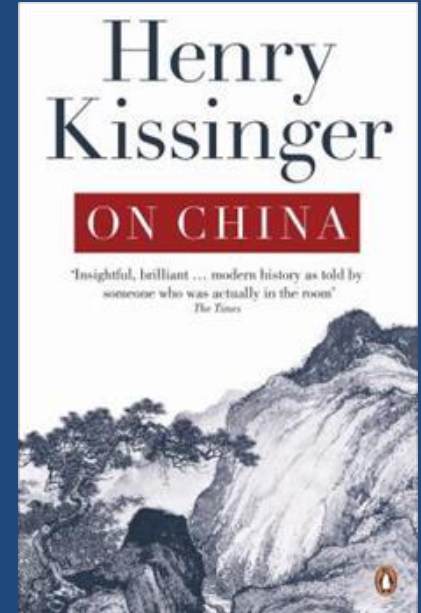
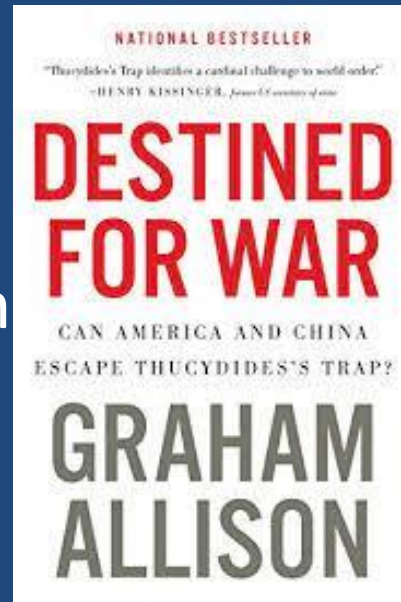
- “These competitions require the United States to rethink the policies of the past two decades—policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners. For the most part, this premise turned out to be false.”  
*National Security Strategy 2018.*

# The Spectrum of Great(est) Power Relations

- Great power concert – 1815-1848, 1920-1930
- Condominium/Alliance
  - 480-466 BCE, 1726-1740, 1885-1900
- Cooperation/Détente - 1970-1979
- Competition
- Confrontation (Crisis) - 1962
- Conflict (between opposing coalitions)
  - Korea, Vietnam
- War between great powers

# The Thucydides Trap

- “The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm this raised in Sparta, made war inevitable.”  
(Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 1:23).



# Japan's dilemma, 1941

- “Supposing a minor state is in conflict with a much more powerful one and expects its position to grow weaker every year. If war is unavoidable, should it not make the most of its opportunities before its position gets still worse?” *On War*, 601.

Photo # NH 50931 Japanese torpedo attack on "Battleship Row", Pearl Harbor, 7 Dec. 1941



# Great power competition is NORMAL!

- This is unfamiliar terrain for the US
- In the last period of significant great power competition (1890-1939) we chose a policy of isolation and regional focus (except for the second Wilson term)
- Post-WW2 global competition was bipolar, as great powers either declined (UK. France) or recovered from disaster (Germany, Japan)
- Post-Cold War unipolar moment, no military competitor



# US-China Relations: A New Cold War?



# A “Second Cold War”?

- The USSR voluntarily removed itself from an emerging global economy; China is a critical element in a developed global economy
- US-Soviet competition was played out between proxies and coalition partners
- The US conceded Soviet spheres of influence
- The nuclear balance is lopsided
- Are China’s objectives as global and radical as the Soviet Union’s were?

# A better historical parallel: 1870-1914

- British relative decline from being the leading industrial nation
- Emergence of new great powers (Germany, Italy, Japan) and the stagnation/decline of older ones (Austria-Hungary, France)
- USA benefits from very favorable international security environment to become leading power

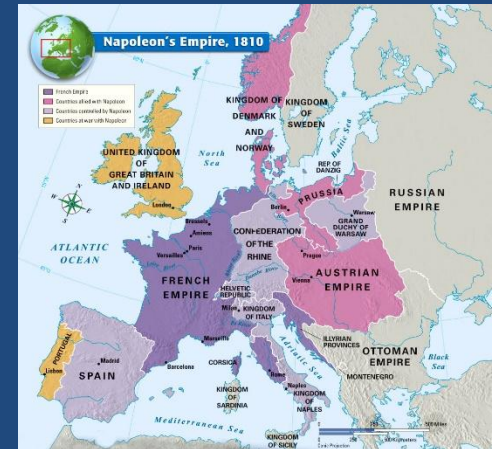
# This period ended tragically





# What examples of great power competition are studied at the Naval War College?

- Sparta-Athens
- France-United Kingdom
- Germany-United Kingdom
- Germany-US
- US-USSR

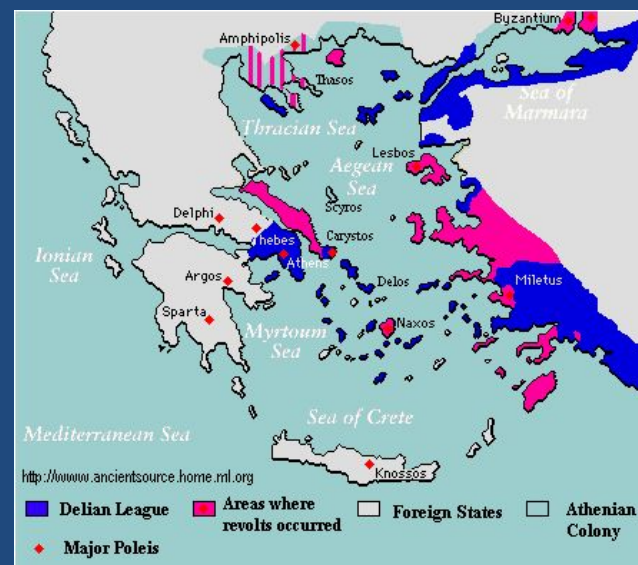
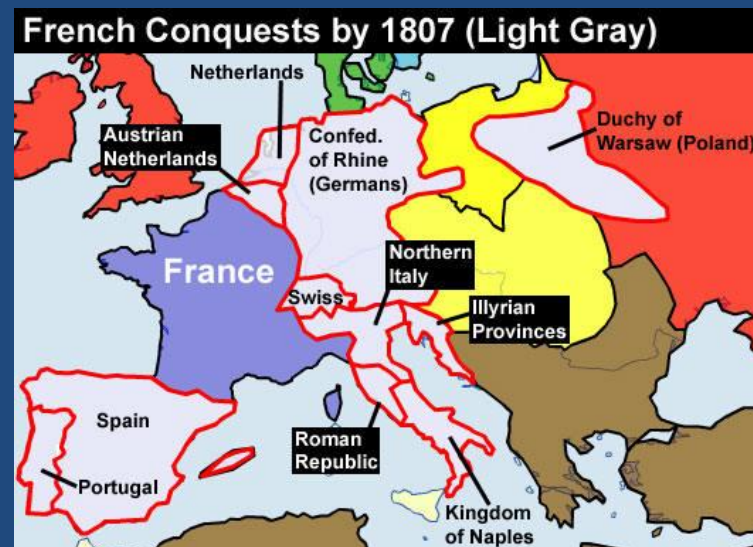


# What can we learn from them?

- Two factors are particularly critical
  - Coalitions and Alliances
  - Economics
- Change can be driven by external factors
- Leadership matters
- Episodes of war and peace
  - Wars more frequent earlier in history, when costs and consequences were not as extreme
  - Great power wars are VERY costly

# Revisionists

- **Aggressive purposes:**  
("positive" aim")
- Change system entirely
- Change leadership of system
- Change place in the system
- Acquire territory/sphere of influence





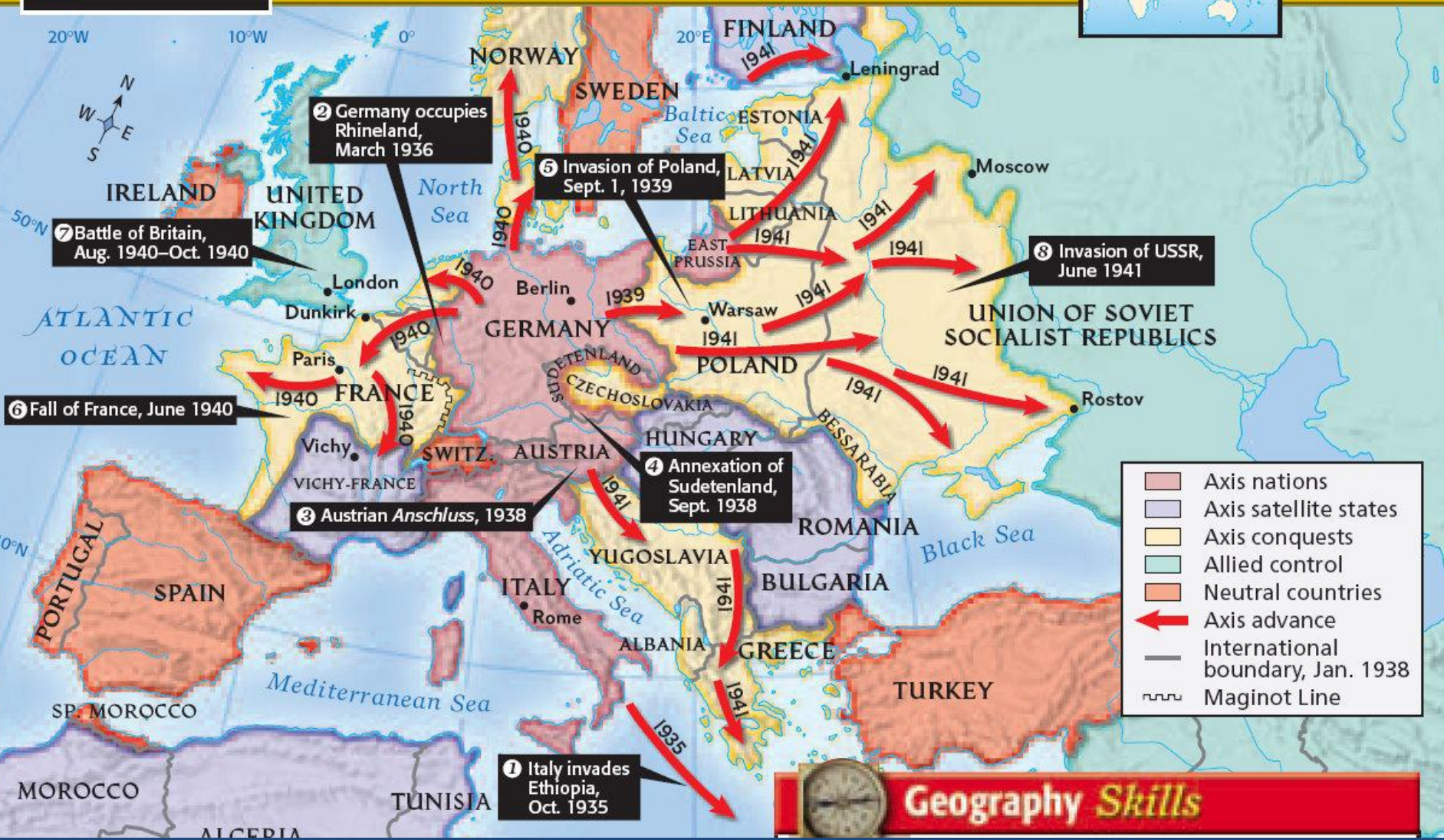
# Status quo

- **Defensive purposes:**  
(negative aim)
- Maintain leadership of system
- Manage system transition
- Manage decline
- Maintain territory/status
- Restore balance of power





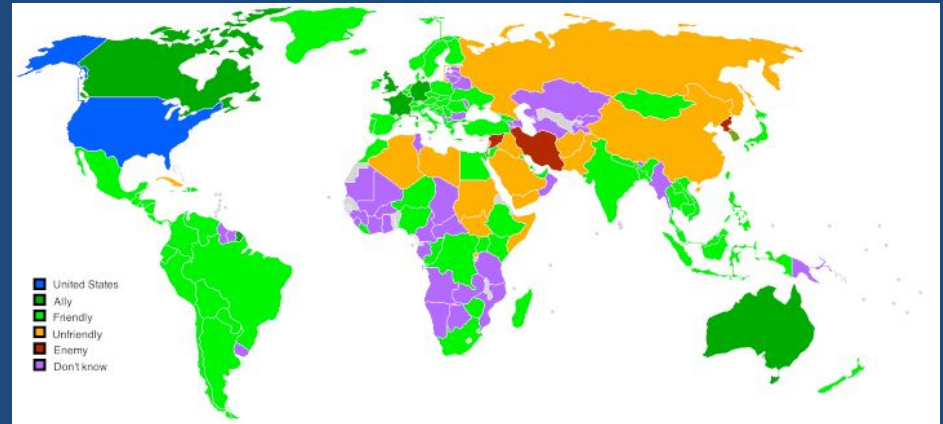
# Axis Expansion, 1935–1941



- Axis nations
- Axis satellite states
- Axis conquests
- Allied control
- Neutral countries
- Axis advance
- International boundary, Jan. 1938
- Maginot Line

# The stronger coalition usually wins

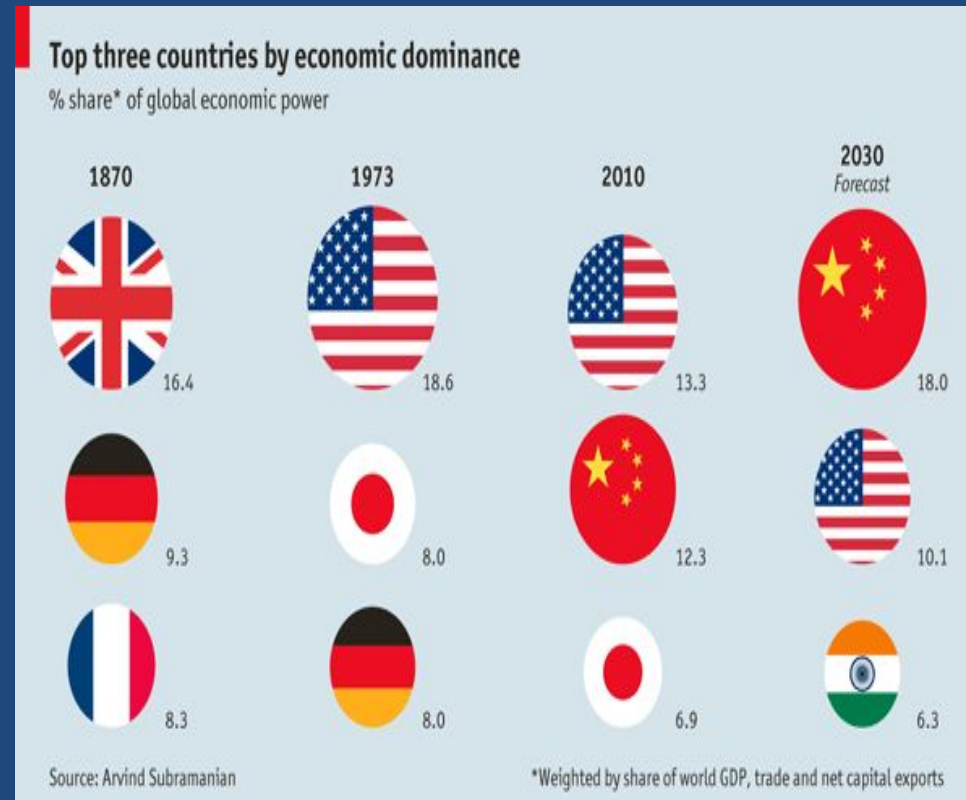
- Sparta defeats Athens by allying with Persia
- Britain faces its most dire situations when:
  - No allies against France (American Revolution)
  - No immediate allies against Germany (1940)
- Axis fail to cooperate
- Western coalition fundamentally stronger than the Soviet Bloc





# Economics matter, but...

- Athens lost the Second Peloponnesian War
- Britain lost the American Revolution
- Germany squandered potential economic superiority
- USSR squandered its economic potential
- Value of diplomacy and prudence



# Causes of system transitions

- Collapse of norms/traditions
  - French Revolution, Russian Revolution, Chinese Civil War, Iranian Revolution
- Power transition as new powers emerge
  - Military revolutions (1500s, 1860s, 1930s, 1945)
  - Economic revolutions (1800, 1900, 1980)
- Economic disruption
  - 1929-38, 1970s, 1997, 2008, 2020

# Leaders matter

- What is the reputation of political leaders?
  - Pericles, Churchill, FDR
- How trustworthy are they?
  - Alcibiades, Kaiser, Hitler
- How honest are they with themselves? With their subordinates? With their people?
  - Mao, Saddam
- Are they reckless or prudent?

# Key concepts *in competition*

- Distinguishing between existential and lesser threats
- Building/maintaining effective coalitions
- Maintaining economic competitiveness
- Sustaining public support
- Avoiding over-commitment/overextension
- Managing risk/avoiding escalation
- Understanding the consequences of war

# What starts great power wars?

- Wars of choice
  - Perception of existential threat
  - Window of opportunity/vulnerability
  - Domestic politics
- Wars of response/reaction
  - Escalation
  - Allies/entangling commitments
  - Actions of other parties
    - Multipolar environment (great powers)
    - Actions of middle/minor powers

# Great power wars, once begun...

- Tend to be protracted
- Tend to be fought in multiple “rounds”
  - “In war, the result is rarely ever final”
  - First/Second Peloponnesian Wars, WW1/2
  - “Second tries” may have more extreme aims
- Tend to escalate
  - Horizontally (geographic spread, coalitions)
  - Vertically (intensity)
  - Rhetorically/ideologically (especially 2<sup>nd</sup> try)



# The Decision for War

- **“No one starts a war – or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so -- without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it. The former is its political purpose, the latter its operational objective. This is the governing principle which will set its course, prescribe the scale of means and effort which is required, and make its influence felt throughout down to the smallest operational detail.” (Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 579)**

# Sage Advice



“Because anyone can start a war when he wants to, but not finish it, before taking on such an enterprise a prince must measure his strengths, and govern his conduct on that basis.”

Niccolo Machiavelli,  
*Discourses*, vol. 2 ch. 10.

# War termination

- Because no one should start a war without knowing how you will end it, and because the costs and consequences of great power wars are so great, thinking about how the war might end is critical for planners.
  - Do you know what you are really fighting for?
    - What is the political objective and its value?
    - If defending the status quo, what elements are critical?
    - Do you need to fight to the bitter end, or can you negotiate?
  - What outcome is realistic? How do you define “victory”?
    - A strategic pause may be a significant success.
    - An unsatisfactory settlement may be better than protracted war
  - What concessions are you willing to make to achieve peace early, and avoid escalation?
  - Is time on your side in this war? In peacetime?

# How do great power wars end?

- Negotiation
  - Stalemate
  - Internal political shift
  - Economic exhaustion
  - Rational calculus
  - Military exhaustion of both sides
- Imposed peace
  - Regime collapse
  - Social upheaval
  - Military exhaustion on one side

# The risks of great power war

- Great power wars always have costs and consequences that were unanticipated
- Great power wars can threaten, undermine, or overturn the existing international economic system that one side wishes to defend
- Even wars with non-great powers can escalate, inviting intervention by the other side, or become protracted problems
- Managing competition is preferable to fighting great power war

# The role of nuclear weapons

- *“Thus far the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have almost no other useful purpose.”*  
Bernard Brodie, *The Absolute Weapon*, 1946



# How does this apply to the future?

- One of the most important political objectives for the US and others will be to maintain as much control over the international system as possible *without resorting to war*.
- Limiting and winning wars, as a last resort, still requires serious thought and analysis – if only to maintain adequate military deterrence against plausible scenarios.
- The concepts and tools of strategy and the lessons of history are applicable to both peace and war

# The speech of Pericles

- “...indeed, I am more afraid of our own blunders than of the enemy’s devices.”  
(Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, I:144)

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