

# Treating the Pathologies of Victory: Hardening the Nation for Strategic Competition

Thomas P. Ehrhard, PhD

For years after the Cold War ended, it was hard to make the case in polite company that the United States should continue to focus on major-power competition in its national security strategy.<sup>1</sup> America won. The Soviet Union vanished, its republics flew apart, and its client states went their own way. The vaunted Soviet military returned home and rapidly atrophied. The Soviet Union's brutal history made it hard enough for American national security experts to imagine the Soviet Union's swift demise, let alone the relatively bloodless way it happened.

Given the fortuitous outcome, it was easy, expedient, and popular to imagine that this marked the end of history. The global alliance of representative governments had triumphed over a seemingly implacable foe, and weak authoritarian states suddenly seemed vulnerable. Events had their own way of highlighting the exceptional nature of this strategic turning point. Operation Desert Storm cemented that conclusion as America ejected Saddam Hussein's Soviet-equipped army from Kuwait using a blizzard of military technology built to prevail against the Red Army in Central Europe. It seemed entirely pessimistic, even paranoid, to insist that the U.S. military should use these events as an opportunity to configure itself to prevail against major powers in the 21st century.

In many respects, America's Cold War triumphalism was not exceptional. Winners almost always fall prey to hubris; dramatic winners always do. This is the pathology of victory.

But history exacts a price for hubris. The U.S. national security bureaucracy has been afflicted by a multitude of strategic viruses over the past 30 years, and the accompanying incremental, almost imperceptible corruptions of the U.S. military accrued after the Cold War now threaten to undermine the basic competitive advantages that caused America to prevail. Not all of these maladies are physical, and for many in the national security enterprise, they are deeply embedded and generational. It is all they know.

Normalized dysfunction infused Pentagon thinking, dialogue, and actions, resulting in a general reluctance to accept the security environment as it presented itself. As with all things, strategic pragmatists who saw the post-Cold War "unipolar moment" as anomalous were forced to swim against this bureaucratic current, absorbing derision and marginalization.<sup>2</sup> Thus, embedded ideas may be hard to dislodge in the search for strategic reawakening.

Major-power competition is back—although, of course, it never really left—but the pathologies of victory remain. For America to rise to the challenge once again, we must

understand how the end of the Cold War led the American defense bureaucracy to evolve ways of thinking that left America in a position of competitive inferiority. In this essay, we will explore some of the most damaging pathologies and recommend prescriptions to return the U.S. to a position of purposeful competitiveness.

Although there are many, four pathologies of victory stand out:

- The triumphalism of the 1990s led to the ultimately corrosive seduction of overseas engagement and constant intervention;
- After 9/11, strategic distraction delayed a more comprehensive understanding and reaction to China's rise and Russia's re-emergence as self-identified and seriously dangerous enemies;
- The analytic focus of the Cold War atomized to the point where, as a nation, we lost our ability to mobilize our brainpower for major-power competition and, as a necessary precondition, to conduct deep, strategically focused studies of our adversaries; and
- As major-power competition reemerged, a new and powerful brand of wishful thinking surfaced that actively resisted strategic reform on the scale required by the emerging security environment.

This essay explores each of these American post-Cold War pathologies, revealing their deleterious, if unintended, effect on our ability to compete with Russia and China in the coming decades. The triumphalism of the 1990s forms the foundational mindset. Its bookend, wishful thinking, infuses all of the pathologies, so it can be thought of as the key enabler. In the concluding section, six key strategic judgments about today's security environment, resisted by a bureaucracy bathed in this acquired mindset, demonstrate the deleterious effects on our contemporary

strategic dialogue that hamstringing America's competitive rebirth.

The essay focuses on the Department of Defense (DOD), for that is the center of gravity of this publication and the epicenter for some of the worst cases of pathological strategic dysfunction. To be sure, the entire national security enterprise fell prey to these afflictions, and they all deserve careful retrospective treatment, but we concentrate mostly on the Pentagon.

The reader should be aware that this essay contains challenges. It specifically calls into question deeply embedded ways of thinking that have been parroted by many national security commentators. Interestingly (and somewhat ironically), many of these themes align with propaganda coming from Russia and China, so the reader must retain a healthy skepticism, fight confirmation bias, and consider the consequences of how distortions in our collective thinking affect strategic competitiveness, all of which may lead the reader to conclude that a fundamental correction is required.

### **Pathology #1: Triumphalism**

The Cold War's decisive end virtually guaranteed triumphalism in America. Some commentators believe we overexploited our victory in foreign policy, for example, by expanding the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) into previous Warsaw Pact and even, in the case of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, into formerly Soviet territories. From a broader perspective, however, history will treat America as a remarkably forgiving victor. Perhaps more important, as a matter of rediscovering competitive discipline and focus, we must gain greater awareness of and become more allergic to parroting Russian and Chinese propaganda. Externally, by any historical standard, America served as a magnanimous victor, but the internal effects of such a dramatic victory sowed seeds of dysfunction that act as a competitive anchor restricting vital strategic reform.

Bureaucratically, the remarkable end of the Cold War led to the elimination of bedrock institutions by decisions that catalyzed

a corrosion of our nuclear deterrence forces and set in motion a series of conventional force distortions in force posture, war planning, and force modernization and recapitalization that, unless challenged and reformed, will hamper our ability to compete effectively against two dedicated foes. More ominously, the 1990s served as a prime catalyst for the rise of China and Russia's resurgence.

The abandonment and subsequent neglect of our nuclear strength represents a clear example, and it happened quickly. In 1991, the George H. W. Bush Administration ordered dramatic, unilateral nuclear weapon reductions (called Presidential Nuclear Initiatives or PNIs) in which Russian reciprocity was merely "encouraged." The entire PNI process occurred in a backroom manner with little consultation or debate. Although the PNIs contained some strategic logic, such as attempting to induce a reduction of Russian tactical nuclear weapons, the Russians never reciprocated. Thus, we were left with a massive Russian superiority in tactical nuclear weapons that, together with the rise of Vladimir Putin and the volatility of his regime, presents a major threat to strategic stability.

Additionally, the PNIs affected strategic nuclear forces in a way that significantly exceeded arms control agreements, including the unilateral, accelerated retirement of the Minuteman II ICBM and the cancellation of mobile Peacekeeper and small ICBM programs. PNIs also ended Peacekeeper production; capped the B-2 stealth bomber program at a "platinum bullet" level of 20 aircraft; terminated the stealthy (nuclear) Advanced Cruise Missile; and ended production of the advanced W-88 D-5 submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) warhead.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps most important, the PNIs dissolved the Air Force's venerable Strategic Air Command (SAC).

Thus, on June 1, 1992, a mere five months after the December 26, 1991, dissolution of the Soviet Union, SAC disbanded. Air Force nuclear capabilities lost their powerful advocate in Omaha and were placed under Air Combat Command, a fighter-dominated organization

in Langley, Virginia. Conventional force leaders opined that the dramatic increases in conventional military effectiveness created by the Second Offset Strategy could supplant nuclear weapons.<sup>4</sup> As a result, officers with nuclear experience gradually found their careers curtailed, and nuclear unit morale plummeted.

The dramatic anti-nuclear maneuvers of the immediate post-Cold War period and their aftermath now seem shortsighted in light of the atrophy and institutional neglect within the Air Force's nuclear enterprise. After a series of embarrassing incidents involving the loss of control of a nuclear weapon and related firing of the Air Force Secretary and Chief of Staff in 2009, the Air Force was compelled to reincarnate a SAC-like institution in the form of the Air Force Global Strike Command, led by a four-star general.<sup>5</sup> Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, addressing the obvious morale problem in the force, declared that "we must restore the prestige that attracted the brightest minds of the Cold War era."<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, however, they had already, as airmen like to say, fallen behind the power curve on nuclear. No amount of report-writing, fist-pounding, rhetorical assurances, or half-hearted stabs at institutional reform could bring back the rather draconian, highly disciplined culture required to advocate for, control, and operate nuclear systems that had been established over decades.

Today, every important American nuclear system needs recapitalization, and the defense bureaucracy delayed each of those systems until there is no more room to retreat.<sup>7</sup> Due to bureaucratic triumphalism, the entire nuclear enterprise has been fighting a retrograde action since the end of the Cold War with no relief in sight.

The assault on nuclear institutions created a wasting strategic asset, but the bureaucratic effects of triumphalism also served to degrade America's conventional force posture after the end of the Cold War. The surprising overmatch in 1991 against the seemingly powerful Soviet-equipped Iraqi military in Operation Desert Storm exacerbated conventional pathologies.

## Impact on Defense Modernization and Recapitalization

Two areas where triumphalism hurt our conventional posture were defense modernization and recapitalization, which started on a decades-long hiatus in the 1990s from which it never recovered. Less well-understood is the complete reorientation of American war planning and force posture that left American forces geriatric, lacking in readiness, and stretched far too thin. We are now asking those depleted forces to deter and potentially confront two modernized, resurgent, acquisitive, self-confident militaries, each of which has been laser-focused on overcoming the U.S. military. How did that happen?

The U.S. military had been oriented toward deterring and fighting the Soviet military in a battle royal in the European Central Front and, to a lesser extent, in the Pacific. As the Soviet Union dissolved, each of the armed services found itself groping for a new identity that would support its people, forces, acquisition programs, and budget. What ensued was a gradual separation from war thinking and war planning and a slide into “engagement” and “shaping” the world. The Les Aspin-led 1993 Bottom-Up Review (BUR) exemplified this shift:

While deterring and defeating major regional aggression will be the most demanding requirement of the new defense strategy, our emphasis on engagement, prevention, and partnerships means that, in this new era, U.S. military forces are more likely to be involved in operations short of declared or intense warfare.<sup>8</sup>

Not all was lost: Strategy always lurks in dark corners of the Pentagon. During a brief period in the mid-1990s, spurred by the Office of Net Assessment’s concept of an ongoing Revolution in Military Affairs, the services briefly revived their interest in thinking about future warfare. A series of service-led annual war games ensued that imagined what threats might lurk in the future security environment.

But that brief flowering of interest was soon buried by the emerging “shaping” and “engagement” theory and its de-emphasizing of warfighting.

The Goldwater–Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986<sup>9</sup> also created very powerful regional combatant commanders who capitalized on peacetime engagement. U.S. European Command had always dominated the others for pragmatic reasons, but regionally focused shaping now provided increased status and purpose for others, especially U.S. Central Command. Threats posed by Iraq and Iran during the 1990s, including the post–Desert Storm Iraqi no-fly zone, allowed Central Command to grow in power and influence. General Anthony “Tony” Zinni in Central Command and Admiral Dennis Blair in Pacific Command capitalized on the regional commands’ newly found diplomatic leverage, filling a gap created by the Department of State, which remained content to emphasize bilateral, embassy-based diplomacy.<sup>10</sup> In this new geostrategic environment, the State Department found itself unable to match or control the growth of the Defense Department’s regional shaping mission.

Numerous commentators have deplored this “militarization of foreign policy,” but within the DOD, this trend led paradoxically to the “diplommatization” of the U.S. military senior leadership and their staffs, who increasingly saw themselves as super-ambassadors rather than as war planners and fighters. The *sine qua non* of a regional combatant commander’s power became the number of forces deployed in his theater, which supposedly provided greater shaping leverage, but his schedule began to look more like a diplomat’s. After the 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review,<sup>11</sup> which enshrined shaping, regional staffs dedicated to peacetime shaping ballooned at the expense of operational war planners, and this trend continued unabated in the ensuing decades.

As a result, the armed services found themselves having to supply more and more of their aging forces for regional shaping, and this drew their attention away from global deployment

and joint, combined-arms, operational warfighting. Forces deployed and operated more and prepared for war less, causing a gradual decline in warfighting readiness and an acceleration of equipment and personnel wear and tear. Even the concept of fighting two simultaneous “major theater wars,” albeit against weak opponents, became a fiction as U.S. forces deployed as “fight tonight” forces in various regions, or piecemeal to a series of non-war plan contingencies throughout the 1990s. These deployments sapped their ability to respond to the execution of actual war plans.

The constant deployment strain also affected military people and caused a troubling decline in retention, the bedrock of U.S. military expertise and professionalism. After a decade of strain, the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review noted the effect on the force pinched by a lack of recapitalization and constant use: “Excessive operational demands on the force have taken a toll on military personnel.”<sup>12</sup> Brookings scholar Michael O’Hanlon wrote that despite some positive changes, “[b]y far the most troubling trend during the Clinton era was the real and significant decline in troop morale.”<sup>13</sup>

Those demands caused U.S. weapon systems to atrophy as well. The George H. W. Bush Administration believed it could curtail weapon system procurement by “skipping a generation” of systems, ostensibly to modernize more quickly, but under the Bill Clinton Administration, skipping a generation turned into the so-called procurement holiday in which defense procurement was slashed to 50 percent of Reagan-era levels. Those cuts made some sense given the Cold War victory, but the procurement hiatus went on far too long. Essentially, the so-called post-Cold War peace dividend came at the expense of military personnel and procurement even as overdeployment of forces caused the aging of key weapon systems.

### **Exploitation by Russian and Chinese Military Planners**

To make matters worse, constant U.S. presence and combat operations in the 1990s gave

Russian and Chinese military planners a convenient, threatening, and easily analyzable target that intensified and focused their acquisition and reform efforts. Both militaries studied each of the American campaigns carefully, often sending advisers to observe. The reform and modernization incentive that these operations provided our major-power competitors cannot be overstated.

- For China, Operation Desert Storm, the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, and Operation Allied Force, the NATO operation to stop the Serbian slaughter of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, provided a powerful stimulus for modernization and reform. Desert Storm showed the Chinese that they clearly lagged behind the U.S. military in significant ways; the carriers sent by the U.S. to tamp down the Taiwan Strait crisis hyperfocused their anti-carrier efforts, which resulted in the DF-21D medium-range ballistic missile system; and Allied Force included the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade—an event that made an impression.
- For Russia, Desert Storm proved Admiral Sergey Gorshkov’s<sup>14</sup> prediction that the U.S. had achieved a “military-technical revolution” that obsolesced the Russian conventional forces that had seemed so ominous in the 1970s.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, several U.S. military operations in their Balkan backyard (notably Operations Deliberate Force and Allied Force) cemented the U.S. as a deeply threatening aggressor that they could not deter and that essentially did not respect their perceived zone of influence. As Vladimir Putin retorted in 2016 when asked whether Russian intervention in Syria “aggravated” U.S.–Russian relations, “Think about Yugoslavia. This is when it started.”<sup>16</sup>

Driven by those events, Russian and Chinese militaries set out to emulate and adapt various aspects of U.S. operational concepts,

weapons, and organizational structures. It was not hard for the Russians, since we invited several waves of Russian military officers to attend our joint warfighting and war planning schools during the 1990s. The Chinese downloaded what they needed through cyber-espionage and flooded academic institutions with students and professors eager to capitalize on our open system.

Yet within the Pentagon, those ripple effects barely caused concern. We were the champions, and the weak not only suffered what they must,<sup>17</sup> but were ignored. The 1990s addiction to shaping and its later incarnation in the 2000s as “Phase Zero” continued unabated, caught in an inertial cul-de-sac. Rather than providing a peace dividend for the American people and its military, the post-Cold War period became an era of constant military operations, produced senior leaders focused on diplomacy at the expense of warfighting, resulted in forces degraded by corroding readiness and personnel strain, and offered precious little strategic benefit from all the high-sounding, self-referential shaping rhetoric.

All of this happened for comprehensible reasons, but it was also based on the rather non-strategic assumption that the unipolar moment would last indefinitely. Triumphalism, a natural byproduct of a stunning victory in the Cold War and the evolutionary political dynamics in its aftermath, represented a seductive attraction that infuses the DOD to this day. Pentagon insiders may point the finger at others—and, indeed, the entire national security system contributed to the general decay—but if we are to rise out of the post-Cold War morass, the Pentagon bureaucracy must accept that it not only went along with, but also actively supported many of triumphalism’s most corrosive elements. Multiple generations of officers helped to create and support the shaping narrative and exacerbated the drift away from warfighting. Yet those years resulted in the emergence of more pathologies than just triumphalism.

## **Pathology #2: Strategic Distraction: 9/11 and Its Aftermath**

This gradual atrophy of war planning and focus, in addition to the high operational tempo experienced during the 1990s, accelerated after the attacks on 9/11. Operations in Afghanistan and Iraq dragged on with no meaningful strategic gains to show for the enduring, costly effort. The theory of shaping should have been debunked by this time if evidence had anything to do with it, but instead of preventing war and leading to a more peaceful world, constant deployment just led to a weary force engaged in constant operations. This accelerated the worst aspects of 1990s force atrophy, prompted international observers to view the U.S. as overly meddlesome, and stimulated unnecessary frictions. The result: strategic distraction.

Throughout the celebratory 1990s, a small minority of strategists like Andrew Marshall in the Office of Net Assessment (ONA) pointed to the potential emergence of China as a strategic competitor. Working in and for that office since 1996, I observed and supported a significant analytical effort exploring that issue. Despite evidence from Chinese sources that their economic resurgence and strategic rise might accelerate, however, ONA remained a voice crying out in the Pentagon wilderness.

Working in the ONA provided a catbird seat from which to watch Pentagon bureaucrats, in uniforms and suits, actively resist the possibility that any nation, let alone China, might emerge as a strategic competitor. But even ONA was largely dismissive of the storm brewing in Russia. In 1999, obscure Boris Yeltsin loyalist Vladimir Putin became the fifth Russian prime minister in less than 18 months. Russia’s economy was in shambles, its demographic trends looked disastrous, and its military was bogged down in a quagmire in Chechnya. Meanwhile, the Pentagon was captivated by its operations in the Balkans, which served as an operational distraction.

As a result, anyone arguing for China’s or Russia’s phoenix-like rise were easily dispatched by the Pentagon cognoscenti. The methods ranged from calling people Chicken

Littles, accusing them of pining for the Cold War, or more derisively charging them with attempting to create another major competitor to revitalize a Cold War–like defense industrial base. It was common to hear the rather strategically dubious retort (often from very senior officials), “Are you deliberately trying to turn China into our enemy?” The majority felt secure in ignoring the mounting evidence of Chinese and Russian resurgence, in part because they believed that American military dominance and global engagement precluded or suppressed the rise of belligerent powers, but also because their attention was occupied by never-ceasing military interventions.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks made it dramatically easier for the bureaucracy to distract itself even though the years following that tragic event also included the acceleration of both China and Russia as troubling strategic competitors. Furthermore, the U.S. response to 9/11 hastened military atrophy in real and subjective terms, most tellingly for the power projection forces that would be critical in deterring a rising China and revanchist Russia. Ground and special operations forces took center stage in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Rumsfeld 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review, which was going to shine a bright light on the rise of China, was hurriedly rewritten at the 11th hour to emphasize counterterrorism (CT).<sup>18</sup> Counterterrorism ruled the day in both ideological and budgetary terms, and the focus on counterinsurgency (COIN) gradually cemented America’s extended presence in Iraq and Afghanistan.

When the refocus on CT and COIN did not happen fast enough, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates pushed it harder at the expense of power projection forces. As a seasoned veteran of D.C. political turf wars, Gates knew that advocating for new CT/COIN systems was not good enough: He had to denigrate others in the zero-sum game of budgetary politics. Gates presided over what Center for Strategic and International Studies defense budget analyst Todd Harrison accurately described as “the hollow buildup” of the 2000s.<sup>19</sup> Although procurement

funding rose slightly, increases came from specialized gear that has little or no utility in fighting a major power. Under Gates’ watch, even talking about China as an adversary became banned speech for Pentagon personnel in the years from 2009–2011, well after the Chinese Second Artillery rocket forces had deployed DF-21D medium-range anti-ship ballistic missiles designed to hold the aircraft carrier air wing well outside its useful combat radius.<sup>20</sup>

The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review identified China as a country poised at a “strategic crossroads.” In retrospect, the 2006 QDR serves as a lodestar for bureaucratic distraction: “U.S. policy seeks to encourage China to choose a path of peaceful economic growth and political liberalization, rather than military threat and intimidation.”<sup>21</sup> The bureaucracy loved that language, but China was not at a crossroads. It was marching down a very purposeful strategic path and would not be shaped.

Strategic distraction has a long half-life in the Pentagon. Even today, as the evidence pointing to the need to operate credibly against burgeoning Chinese and Russian conventional military formations multiplies, the Pentagon retains a distracting obsession with the “gray zone,” a term created by Special Operations Command that describes sub-threshold irregular activities designed to destabilize a territory. Rather than actively developing those lost or atrophied aspects of major force employment, combined-arms operating concepts, heavy logistics, and power projection against formidable defenses, commentators and bureaucrats still reflexively talk about the gray zone. After almost two decades of dealing with occupation and counterterrorism, the gray zone had become the comfort zone.

Again, former Secretary of Defense James Mattis teaches us: “The surest way to prevent war is to be prepared to win one.”<sup>22</sup> Chinese and Russian planners have carefully and painstakingly read our book and are becoming increasingly comfortable that they can prevail in major combat operations. If that continues, gray zone activity will be the least of our worries.

All of these distractions combined with 1990s triumphalism left the U.S. defense establishment at a dramatic analytical disadvantage as well, compared to our major power competitors. Events conspired to hyperfocus their study of our military, whereas ours became ever more distracted. How did a deficit in adversary analysis become yet another troubling pathology of victory?

### **Pathology #3: Lack of Analytical Depth and Sophistication**

Analytical depth and sophistication about oneself and one's adversary constitute the cornerstone of any strategic competition. In order to compete, you must know your adversary. To compete well, you must know your adversary better than he knows you. The vast analytical depth underpinning our understanding of the Soviet Union served as a critical foundation of our ability to conduct a purposeful strategic competition. To be sure, analytical depth did not guarantee perfect understanding or translate into a focused strategy. That is not how strategy works in America. But it is true that the nation itself—its government, academic institutions, journalists, and interested citizens—combined over decades to build a deep, elaborate, longitudinal body of knowledge about the Soviet Union.

Above all, it is the *relative* depth, sophistication, and competitive focus of that knowledge base that provide competitive leverage. The objective is not to gain such analytical superiority that you can anticipate an adversary's decisions and actions: We cannot achieve that even for our own government. The goal must be to gain a more focused, more complex, more diverse understanding of the enemy *than the enemy has of us*. In that important relative sense, the American national security community suffers from an analytical deficit of such magnitude that only a serious, focused, and well-resourced campaign can meet the strategic need.

The first, most compelling analytical deficit for America in this triangular strategic competition stems from a dramatic asymmetry of

focus. China and Russia know one thing: America is their most compelling existential threat and must be overcome. Our victory in the Cold War and liquidation of authoritarian regimes thereafter put us squarely in their strategic crosshairs. Our military employed an ever-expanding set of mind-bending innovations, seemingly without incentive, and was not shy about showing it off—stealth aircraft, precision guided munitions, even more accurate cruise missiles, and unmanned systems to name only a few. China had been carefully studying us as the prime target of their ambitions far longer than most Americans would like to admit, back to our normalization of relations in the 1970s and Ronald Reagan's acceleration of that relationship in the early 1980s.<sup>23</sup>

By contrast, we atomized our analytical focus from one big thing, the Soviet Union, to everything. Everything mattered, which meant that as a practical matter, nothing mattered. The intelligence community, for example, slashed its Russian analytical capability throughout the 1990s and then, after 9/11, gutted it, either retiring or repurposing highly educated, top-level analysts to counterterrorism work. The result was that by 2015, when I was asked by Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work to catalyze the DOD's and the intelligence community's Russian analytical effort, I found what amounted to a 15-year analytical black hole. When you lose longitudinal analytical depth, the rolling narrative about where they were and how they got here, it is hard to bring it back. We simply had lost our focus on Russia and required crash rehabilitation.

With respect to China, the defense community suffers from a different analytical deficit. For the most part, the DOD ignored the rise of China after the end of the Cold War. Starting with Admiral Dennis Blair, a succession of commanders of U.S. Pacific Command kept the Navy interested, but the Chinese Second Artillery's development and testing of the DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missile boosted the Navy's interest in the middle 2000s, right in the middle of the Pentagon's period



of maximum distraction during operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

With the exception of efforts by the Navy, which largely kept adversary intelligence compartmented to naval issues and to itself, China was not the subject of serious analytical effort across the U.S. defense establishment until the evidence became overwhelming that its military rise constituted a looming threat. Unlike our approach to Russia, which benefitted from intense analytical focus during the Cold War but then fell into obscurity, the China effort started very slowly and rose gradually over time, but always in lag compared to the pace and magnitude of the People's Liberation Army's military modernization over the past three decades.

Today, intelligence and general analytical interest with respect to either adversary suffer from an inadequate level of analytical supply or demand across the defense community. The intelligence community's general disdain for open-source analysis continues unabated in an era when open-source information has exploded, leaving America with a perilous competitive information deficit.

The Navy remains a demanding customer for China information, but the Air Force, the other power projection service critical to dealing with China's rise, has largely neglected China analysis. Some individual exceptions exist, but for the most part, the Air Force still lacks the institutional interest or senior leader demand for analytical services. The Navy, for example, opened an open-source China Maritime Studies Institute at the Naval War College in the mid-2000s, whereas the Air Force's China Aerospace Studies Institute, modeled on the Navy's, did not open until more than a decade later. Similarly, the Army has slowly increased its demand for Russia-focused analytic support over the past several years, whereas the Air Force, also critical to the European theater, falls a distant second in its demand for Russian intelligence.

Finally, service-centered analytical demand tends to be rather tactical. With the neglect of open-source exploitation, broader strategic

information about either nation tends to be highly compartmented and unavailable to or unknown by senior DOD leaders.

The contrast between current efforts and the Cold War analytical effort within the academic community and among journalists and specialist authors also bears mention. The Pentagon still exerts a powerful influence on each group, so its own analytical loss of concentration inevitably reverberated through those communities as well.

The Cold War academic and journalistic community constituted a diverse, curious, strategically focused group who contributed to a sophisticated, deep analytical pool of knowledge. Most important, those non-governmental sources posed a challenge to government analysts, sharpening America's analytical edge. Investigative journalists dug for information. Academics capitalized on strategic moments like the orbit of Sputnik in 1957, the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, or the defense reform debates of the 1980s to examine and critique the defense issues of the day. Some of that work, such as the work that led to a more nuanced understanding of the role of nuclear weapons, happened entirely outside the government and proved to be groundbreaking.

Nothing approaching that diverse analytical ecosystem exists today to bolster our understanding of China and Russia as strategic competitors. There is very little focus on how to prevail. During the years of distraction, the academic community shifted its focus to counterterrorism or counterinsurgency, and it has been slow to adapt to the re-emergence of major-power competition. Online defense analysis generally lacks the weight and sophistication of its Cold War antecedents, mostly because younger authors lack that comparative lens. As a nation, we imagined away major-power competition. Now that it is back, we do not know what to make of it.

Blame is not the objective here. A natural course of events, evolving bureaucratic incentives, and social trends put us in this position. Well-meaning, patriotic Americans fell into the post-Cold War vortex, leaving strategic

iconoclasts to keep the major-power competition pilot light from extinguishing. But we are where we are, which brings us to our final post-Cold War pathology: wishful thinking.

#### **Pathology #4: Wishful Thinking: The Insidious Pathology**

Remediation of the three maladies described above constitutes a herculean task for the American national security enterprise. Of all the pathologies of victory, however, wishful thinking hurts American strategic competitiveness the most and is the hardest to cure. Wishful thinking describes a broader, umbrella category that serves as a key enabler for all of the other pathologies. In the presence of distractions and analytical hollowness, it gains power. Ironically, wishful thinking also gains momentum as contrary evidence mounts.

Perhaps most appallingly to hard-working Americans, wishful thinking permeates our national security bureaucracy, the very group entrusted with exploring and guarding against the worst scenarios. It drives bureaucratic behavior: The cheerful, positive bureaucrat makes the boss happy and gets promoted, while the brooding, pessimistic, reads-too-much-history, “Chicken Little” empiricist is either confined to a dusty room or reorganized out of a job. The Pentagon bureaucracy, like all government bureaucracies, flourishes on inertia and “go along to get along” attitudes that, from a strategic perspective, retard reform when it is most needed.

Wishful thinking intensifies all of the other maladies like a competitive immuno-suppressive. Strategy is no place for happy talk, and when you are the world’s sole superpower, no matter how loudly we whistle by the strategy graveyard, the human condition dictates unavoidably that everyone else in the world either wants to take America down or would be pleased if it happened. Someone must guard the strategic gates that Americans built over decades with blood and treasure, and they should not be smiling.

British author Christopher Booker captured the dynamics of American post-Cold

War wishful thinking in a striking if unintentional manner by identifying the three phases of what he calls “the fantasy cycle.” First, he observed that wishful thinkers experience the “dream stage” when “all things seem to go well for a time,” as in the triumphal 1990s. Then, “because this make-believe can never be reconciled with reality,” a “frustration stage” sets in, “prompting a more determined effort to keep the fantasy in being.”<sup>24</sup>

After the 1990s, with the catalytic events of 9/11 and the rise of China and resurgence of Russia, the Pentagon entered Booker’s frustration stage, typified by Secretary Robert Gates’ cutting power projection programs and banning references to China as a competitor. Then, as Vladimir Putin thrust Russia back on the stage and invaded Crimea, it took years for the Pentagon to come around to treating China and Russia as a problem requiring action. The Pentagon’s frustration period accelerated, along with escalating efforts at denial, until finally catalyzing in 2018 with the promulgation of Secretary Mattis’s National Defense Strategy, which declared that “we are emerging from a period of strategic atrophy.”<sup>25</sup>

But are we emerging or still mired in strategic atrophy? The Mattis National Defense Strategy seems only to have toughened the Pentagon’s bureaucratic “sitzkrieg.” How long will the dissonant “frustration stage” last? More important, what is Booker’s third and final stage in “the fantasy cycle?” He calls it the “nightmare stage” when, as he puts it, “the fantasy finally falls apart.”<sup>26</sup> Our purpose must be to fight the resistance to strategic reform caused by the pathologies of victory so that we can fend off the nightmare stage.

#### **Six Embattled Strategic Judgments**

Resistance comes in many forms, but it pops up repeatedly in response to key competitive strategic judgments that are critical to enacting the organizational changes required to conduct an effective competitive strategy against Russia and China. To understand the stiff institutional resistance to these ideas, one must understand their institutional ramifications.

Bureaucrats hate reform and understand that to kill it, they must attack its arguments. Six strategic judgments represent the ideological battlegrounds where this drama will play out.

**Strategic Judgment #1: Russia and China present threats that are *increasingly global in nature*.** One often hears denigration of adversary military capability as being only local or regional and thus not worthy of serious attention. Yet even though it has become increasingly obvious that the Russian and Chinese militaries may have achieved local overmatch, it is their increasingly global reach that poses a fundamental organizational challenge to the regional command stovepipes created by the Goldwater–Nichols legislation and exacerbated by the end of the Cold War.

In recent decades, we have become a global power with only regional strategies. How does the Pentagon coordinate and synthesize a response to global threats when each regional commander and staff cares about only one region? In an age in which the space and cyber domains, both inherently global and destabilizing, have become utterly indispensable to American military operations, the reform question becomes how we rationalize a geographically divided, integration-resistant system of regional fiefdoms behind a global campaign against two major-power adversaries.

**Strategic Judgment #2: Russia and China represent *enduring, multi-decadal challenges*.** Naysayers talk about China’s or Russia’s economy tanking as the end of those challenges, or that a change in leadership will somehow lead either nation to go back into its non-threatening box. Those arguments are merely excuses to do nothing and ignore the domestic politics of each country and the desire of their people to rise up out of a national humiliation.

If, however, you believe that China and/or Russia are here to stay as adversaries, that major-power competition is the historical norm and our post–Cold War unipolar decade was an anomaly, then you will advocate for significant changes in force structure and posture, changes in operational concepts, a dramatic

increase in analytic focus and resources, and a return to actual integration (i.e., jointness). Each of these choices rates high on the list of Pentagon institutional allergies.

**Strategic Judgment #3: Russia and China represent *highly volatile, crisis-unstable nuclear threats*.** Conventional force types in the Pentagon, smug in their Second Offset afterglow and the walkovers of the 1990s, thought they got rid of their former nuclear overlords with the end of the Cold War. Regardless of what those officials might desire, our enemies believe that nuclear deterrence represents the highest expression of national power. Moreover, the escalatory dynamics of this age represent a clear, present, and truly existential danger to the American people.

The increasing incentive for preemptive action in the space and cyber domains represents a step-function increase in crisis instability, and awareness of that threat exists only among a very small group of analysts who are able to translate the Cold War literature on this issue into 21st century geopolitical and military-technical terms. We must rediscover a broader understanding of comprehensive stability in the 21st century and find ways to compete that minimize the incentives for preemption and escalation on all three sides.

**Strategic Judgment #4: Russia and China express clear, significant *extraterritorial ambitions*.** Modernists cling to the belief that territorial acquisitiveness is a vestige of our barbaric past. They will often adopt adversary propaganda to support their claims that, for example, Crimea was a part of Russia and contains numerous Russian citizens. Yet we see strong evidence that China and Russia harbor territorial grievances and want to act on them.

Crimea is a “drop-the-mic” example, but new, militarized South China Sea islands, Taiwan, and territorial coercion against India are just a few on a long list of Chinese claims. Most egregiously, Russia’s numerous “frozen conflicts” such as in Eastern Ukraine, Transnistria (Moldova), and Abkhazia and South Ossetia (both in Georgia) represent the aggressive

revanchist doctrine not just of Vladimir Putin, but of the Russian people who applaud his actions.<sup>27</sup> Under the umbrella of advanced anti-access, area denial systems taken from America's Second Offset playbook, everyone on China's and Russia's borders has reason to be worried, and all represent escalatory dangers.

**Strategic Judgment #5: China and Russia represent a *metasystemic strategic challenge*.** That is, both have mobilized their nations to compete with America for primacy. Budgets must be modified, long-term investments made, institutions reimaged, and institutional connective tissues built. Accepting this in full requires a national commitment and a much higher degree of intra- and inter-governmental integration, which the unipolar-comfortable bureaucracy abhors. Integration is hard, but major-power competition demands it. Thankfully, we do not have to be perfect; we need only to be better than China and Russia. Perhaps we should analyze their integration activities to understand what we are up against.

**Strategic Judgment #6: The competition with Russia and China represents an *ideological struggle*.** It becomes tiring to hear wishful thinkers say that this is not an ideological struggle. Again, lack of analytical depth and sophistication seriously hampers this discussion. Very senior Russians and Chinese officials say repeatedly and with great passion that the United States represents an existential ideological enemy that is trying to penetrate and adulterate their cultures and liquidate their political systems. To them, this is ideological on a deep level.

Is it also a reciprocal threat? Former Secretary Mattis thinks so: "Failure to meet our defense objectives will result in decreasing U.S. global influence, eroding cohesion among allies and partners, and reduced access to markets that will contribute to a decline in our prosperity and standard of living."<sup>28</sup>

These six strategic judgments represent just a few of the rhetorical debates that define the struggle between those who desire strategic reform and those who like their current

jobs. In the 1990s, the evidence concerning the chances of major-power competition was there (albeit harder to assess) for those few who would see it. Now that it is obvious, bureaucratic naysayers and foot-draggers have responded by elevating their game. Resistance to reform keeps escalating even as Putin and Xi continue to solidify the case for it.

But the stakes for American national security must take precedence over the comfort requirements of "The Blob," as the entrenched, inertial bureaucracy has been called.<sup>29</sup> In order to support the 2018 National Defense Strategy and embark on a revitalized competitive trajectory, we must address the pathologies of victory and act on Secretary Mattis's admonition to "pursue urgent change at significant scale."<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

The only antidote to the pathologies of victory is fear. In a bureaucracy as large as the Pentagon's, collective fear must reach a point at which it overcomes inertia. That this certainly has happened in China and Russia is evidenced by a series of real institutional reforms in their national security establishments.

Moreover, we have done it before. We feared, in that serious, strategic, existential way, the British during the Revolutionary War and for decades afterward. We feared the Axis Powers enough during World War II to mobilize the nation. We feared the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the first time since the Revolution that we could have been utterly destroyed as a nation. In that extended conflict, both the First and Second Offset Strategies came about as a result of accumulated, collective fear opening the way to meaningful defense reform.

Yet even in the presence of self-declared, powerful nation-state enemies that possess nuclear arsenals and aim to prevail over us, our national security apparatus acts as though we still lived in the bucolic unipolar moment. They prefer business as usual today; about the future, who knows? Because of this bureaucratic sclerosis, the National Defense Strategy has not yet affected budgets or force structure or war plans, nor has it catalyzed an

across-the-board campaign to rebuild our anemic analytic ecosystem.

Thus, the wheel of strategy turns. If we as Americans do not want that wheel to roll over us, we can take positive steps to cast aside some of the more dysfunctional attitudes and orientations that have accumulated over the past 30 years. To prevail against self-declared enemies with focused national power and deeply held historical grievances, America needs to rediscover some of the harder, sharper, more pragmatic aspects of our national character and

adapt them to the challenges of the 21st century security environment. We must irradiate the pathologies of victory and, by doing so, help the defense community to rediscover its latent but uniquely American competitive drive.

The 21st century presents advantages for authoritarian regimes and vulnerabilities for open, representative governments that we have already observed. We ignore them now at our peril.

## Endnotes

1. This essay uses the term “major-power competition” instead of the more common “great-power competition” for a simple reason: By any standard, China and Russia are not great powers. America ranks as the only great power today and for the foreseeable future. We should not ascribe great-power status to adversaries who do not measure up.
2. Among this afflicted subgroup, the now-departed uber-strategist Andrew Marshall saw the potential emergence of China as a strategic adversary as far back as the 1980s and accelerated his analytical focus during the 1990s. Just one of his farsighted projects from the mid-1990s includes an investigation of a purported Chinese carrier-killing medium-range ballistic missile, for which he and his tiny staff were dismissed by a fleet of naval analysts as cranks. The author worked on this project for the Office of Net Assessment in the mid to late 1990s.
3. Susan J. Koch, “Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991–1992,” National Defense University, Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction *Case Study* No. 5, September 2012, pp. 1 and 19, [https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/casestudies/CSWMD\\_CaseStudy-5.pdf](https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/casestudies/CSWMD_CaseStudy-5.pdf) (accessed July 3, 2019).
4. The First Offset Strategy countervailed the Soviet Red Army’s mass and proximity advantage by using nuclear coercion during the immediate post–World War II years. Then, as that competitive advantage waned in the 1960s and 1970s, American strategists conceived of the Second Offset Strategy, which employed microprocessor-based systems to achieve conventional overmatch against superior Red Army numbers and proximity. In both cases, fear drove the defense bureaucracy against a phalanx of naysayers to overcome inertia and enact real reform.
5. The post–Cold War nuclear atrophy adversely affected the Navy’s nuclear deterrent forces as well. The effects of corrosive institutional drift in both nuclear services were captured with clarity in a special independent review for the Secretary of Defense authored by former Strategic Air Command Commander in Chief and retired General Larry Welch and retired Admiral John Harvey in late 2014. For that extraordinary document, see *Independent Review of the Department of Defense Nuclear Enterprise*, U.S. Department of Defense, June 2, 2014, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/Independent-Nuclear-Enterprise-Review-Report-30-June-2014.pdf> (accessed July 3, 2019). The author served as Executive Secretary for the high-level Nuclear Deterrent Enterprise Review Group charged by Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel with addressing the many deficiencies found in that report. See U.S. Department of Defense, “Statement on the Nuclear Enterprise Review & Reforms as Delivered by Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, Pentagon Press Briefing Room,” November 14, 2014, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/606634/statement-on-the-nuclear-enterprise-review-reforms/> (accessed July 3, 2019).
6. Eryn MacDonald, “Independent Review of DOD’s Nuclear Enterprise: Money, Maintenance, and Morale,” Union of Concerned Scientists, November 21, 2014, <https://allthingsnuclear.org/emacdonald/independent-review-of-dods-nuclear-enterprise-money-maintenance-and-morale> (accessed July 3, 2019).
7. For a good explanation of the price of delaying U.S. nuclear recapitalization, see Peter Huessy, “The 40 Year Nuclear Procurement Holiday,” *Real Clear Defense*, October 11, 2016, [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2016/10/12/the\\_40\\_year\\_nuclear\\_procurement\\_holiday\\_110195.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2016/10/12/the_40_year_nuclear_procurement_holiday_110195.html) (accessed July 3, 2019).
8. Les Aspin, Secretary of Defense, *Report on the Bottom-Up Review*, U.S. Department of Defense, October 1993, p. 8, <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=448259> (accessed July 3, 2019).
9. H.R. 3622, Goldwater–Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, Public Law 99-433, October 1, 1986, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-100/pdf/STATUTE-100-Pg992.pdf> (accessed July 4, 2019).
10. For a trenchant examination of the emergence of America’s new proconsuls in the 1990s, see Dana Priest, *The Mission: Waging War and Keeping Peace with America’s Military* (New York, W.W. Norton, 2003).
11. See, for example, “Section III, Defense Strategy: Shaping the International Environment,” in U.S. Department of Defense, *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review*, May 1997, pp. 9–10, <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/quadrennial/QDR1997.pdf?ver=2014-06-25-110930-527> (accessed July 6, 2019).
12. U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, September 30, 2001, p. 8, <https://archive.defense.gov/pubs/qdr2001.pdf> (accessed July 4, 2019).
13. Michael O’Hanlon, “Clinton’s Strong Defense Legacy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 6 (November/December 2003), p. 133, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/20031101.pdf> (accessed July 4, 2019).
14. Sergey Gorshkov was Admiral of the Fleet of the Soviet Union, leading the U.S.S.R. navy and serving at the highest levels of the Soviet defense establishment for much of the Cold War.
15. Eliot A. Cohen, “Come the Revolution,” *National Review*, July 31, 1995.
16. Christian Snyder, “Analysis: How a 1999 NATO Operation Turned Russia Against the West,” *The Pitt News*, September 7, 2017, <https://pittnews.com/article/121917/opinions/analysis-1999-nato-operation-turned-russia-west/> (accessed July 4, 2019).

17. In the Peloponnesian War, 431–404 BC, Athens embarked on a military expedition against the people of Melos, who stood neutral in the war. Facing subjugation or destruction, the Melians protested to the Athenians, who replied that “you know as well as we do that right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” See Chapter XVII, “Sixteenth Year of the War—The Melian Conference—Fate of Melos,” in Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/melian.htm> (accessed July 4, 2019).
18. See, for example, U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, September 30, 2001, pp. 18–19.
19. Todd Harrison, “Defense Modernization Plans Through the 2020s: Addressing the Bow Wave,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, *International Security Program Report*, January 2016, p. 3, [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/publication/160126\\_Harrison\\_DefenseModernization\\_Web.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/160126_Harrison_DefenseModernization_Web.pdf) (accessed July 4, 2019). The labels can be both entertaining and revealing. In the 1990s, the triumphalist acquisition downturn was called the “procurement holiday.”
20. For a comprehensive analysis of this threat, its Soviet precursors during the Cold War, and what the Navy could build to offset this anti-ship system effectively, see Thomas P. Ehrhard and Robert O. Work, *Range, Persistence, Stealth, and Networking: The Case for a Carrier-Based Unmanned Combat Air Wing*, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Analysis, 2008, <https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/The-Case-for-A-Carrier-Based-Unmanned-Combat-Air-System.pdf> (accessed July 4, 2019). Despite building a representative prototype and flying it from a carrier in a series of historic flight tests, the Navy resisted procuring this system for the fleet in a classic case of failure to integrate a strategically leveraged, innovative system. To understand why, see Robert Martinage and Shawn Brimley, “The Navy’s New Museum Drone and Strategic Malpractice,” *War on the Rocks*, April 28, 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/04/the-navys-new-museum-drone-and-strategic-malpractice/> (accessed July 4, 2019).
21. U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, February 6, 2006, p. 29, <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/quadrennial/QDR2006.pdf?ver=2014-06-25-111017-150> (accessed July 4, 2019).
22. James Mattis, Secretary of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge*, U.S. Department of Defense, 2018, p. 5, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf> (accessed July 4, 2019).
23. Jacqueline Deal, “The Fudan Fulcrum,” Ronald Reagan Institute, [https://www.reaganfoundation.org/media/354598/dr\\_jacqueline\\_deal\\_fudan\\_university.pdf](https://www.reaganfoundation.org/media/354598/dr_jacqueline_deal_fudan_university.pdf) (accessed July 4, 2019).
24. Booker lists as one of the contemporary fantasies of our time “the belief that we can sort out the world’s trouble spots by reckless military interventions which fail to anticipate the bloody chaos they will unleash.” Christopher Booker, “What Happens When Great Fantasies, Like Wind Power or European Union, Collide with Reality?” *The Telegraph*, April 9, 2011, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/christopherbooker/8440423/What-happens-when-the-great-fantasies-like-wind-power-or-European-Union-collide-with-reality.html> (accessed July 4, 2019).
25. Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, p. 1.
26. Booker, “What Happens When Great Fantasies, Like Wind Power or European Union, Collide with Reality?”
27. Russia maintains military bases in Transnistria, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia. See Robert Ortung and Christopher Walker, “Putin’s Frozen Conflicts,” *Foreign Policy*, February 13, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/13/putins-frozen-conflicts/> (accessed July 4, 2018).
28. Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, p. 1.
29. Susan B. Glasser, “Trump Takes on The Blob,” *Politico*, March/April, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/03/trump-foreign-policy-elites-insiders-experts-international-relations-214846> (accessed July 4, 2019).
30. Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, p. 11.