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U.S. Leadership in an Era of Great Power Competition

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Summary

Great power competition has returned. Actions by China and Russia to assert spheres of influence by undermining, weakening, or outright invading their neighbors will be a central challenge for the incoming Trump administration. In addition, the continuing threat of nuclear proliferation or employment posed by Iran and North Korea, and challenges posed by terrorist organizations like ISIS, will complicate the agenda for the next team.

It is time for bold U.S. leadership. The next administration can set a strong agenda, ensure it is resourced, and galvanize alliances. If it is to manage great power competition, it will have to.

Demonstrating bold leadership and drawing on the power and prestige available only to the leader of the free world, President Trump can reassure allies and remind adversaries in the strength of America. Doing so will require setting a clear agenda; ensuring it is resourced properly; and leveraging the United States' greatest advantage—Allies—to manage the emerging great power competition, contain Iran and North Korea, and to roll back terrorist groups.

Issue

China and Russia are seeking to re-make regions of the world based on might-makes-right rules. These undermine U.S. efforts over 70 years to create free, prosperous, and independent countries. Iran continues its nuclear program and support to insurgent and terrorist organizations that seek to delegitimize other countries in the Middle East. North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons threatens the United States, and its allies Japan, South Korea, and Australia, and may soon be able to reach the West Coast of the United States. The continued operation of ISIS and other terrorist organizations will be a persistent challenge to the next team.

Complicating these challenges are the ways in which they overlap. Russia has invaded its neighbors and China is taking steps to militarize major international shipping lanes. The United States has needed cooperation from both countries to establish—and then enforce—non-proliferation regimes (or sanctions) against Iran and North Korea. Iran has been a significant player in the fight against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Managing these conflicting objectives while maximizing pursuit of U.S. interests will likely only get more difficult.

It is time for bold U.S. leadership. A bold international agenda for the United States is one that builds U.S. influence and access abroad, even as it bolsters strength. It should start by stating clearly that the United States is in an era of great power competition. By publicly identifying Russian and Chinese actions that undermine U.S. interests, The United States raises the costs to Russia and China of such actions. Examples would include: Russia's invasion of the Ukraine and Georgia and its repeated incursions into NATO airspace. They would also include China's security-threatening incursions around the Senkaku islands and its creation—and ongoing militarization—of concrete islands in the South China Sea.

This step will create risk. China and Russia will seek to explain how their actions are legitimate, or at least justifiable. They will likely apply pressure against U.S. businesses and other U.S. interests globally—such as softening enforcement of sanctions against North Korea. However, the more that countries accede to Chinese and Russian protests of innocence, the more emboldened they are likely to become.

A second element of bold leadership is ensuring that national security is the top budget priority of the next administration. Focusing the legislative agenda on national security issues early will enable the President to push through a defense budget that provides the resources to achieve big objectives: expanding the Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Army. The administration should expect any significant national security spending increase to be opposed by budget hawks in both parties, and by members who seek to balance it with federal spending on domestic programs. The steady erosion of the international security environment over the past 16 years provides a clear picture for why greater resourcing of national security missions is required. It will be up to the next Administration to make that case.

The third leg of leading the United States in a period of great power competition is working with U.S. allies. Allies are the United States' greatest advantage in a great power competition and provide an unrivaled network to amplify U.S. power. Ensuring allies live up to their commitments to their own defense, as well as being able to commit to collective defense, is a basic first step—particularly in NATO. In Asia, concerns about China's aggression and North Korea's provocations are high. Japan and Korea are major contributors to U.S. and regional security, and will continue to be so—as long as they believe the United States remains equally committed to their security.

There will likely be calls within the U.S. to bring troops home and allow allies to fend for themselves. The passion of this argument is understandable. And while the logic is simple, it is wrong. Maintaining U.S. presence abroad is far less costly than frequently deploying even much smaller sized units for exercises and engagement. Strategically, removing U.S. troops from long-standing presence in allied countries in Asia and in Europe would bring cheers in Moscow and Beijing while depriving the United States' of one of its greatest advantages.

Recommended Changes

Articulate a clear, bold strategy for the United States. This should identify the next Administration's view of U.S. interests and indicate what the administration is prepared to undertake to achieve those interests.

The President-elect should ensure that national security issues are his top budget priority. The next administration will need additional resources to ensure the United States is prepared for the range of challenges it will face. Developing and articulating a strategy will send an important signal as to where those resources should be directed. The next step will be to repeal the Budget Control Act and ensuring the defense department, U.S. diplomats, and development efforts are well-resourced.

Leverage Allies to pursue U.S. interests abroad. Reassurance of the closest allies: The UK, France, Germany and others within NATO; Japan, Korea, and Australia, will strengthen this U.S. advantage. Next, reach out to allies who have begun to slide away from the United States: Turkey, the Philippines, and Thailand, so these key actors remain positioned to contribute to a U.S.-led vision for the world.

The world has re-entered a period of great power politics. President Trump and his administration can reframe the competition to one that is manageable for the United States and its allies.

Success will require bold leadership at home, resourcing all tools of national power with the support and buy-in of the Congress, and strong leadership abroad. With those elements, the next administration could re-establish U.S. leadership in a world that will be increasingly adrift without it.

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