

To What Extent Is 'Great Power Competition' A Threat to Global Security?

Written by Cormac Smith

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CORMAC SMITH, MAY 4 2022

The concept of global security is in the foremost position in the minds of international relations policymakers and government officials in most countries. However, the maintenance of global security only bears true significance for the so-called 'great powers'. These powers have the ability to influence the international stage in one direction or another, change the lives of millions, and control the future. In his book *The World after the Peace Conference*, Toynbee describes the concept of a great power as "a political force exerting an effect coextensive with the widest range of the society in which it operates" (Toynbee, 1926). In other words, a great power is a nation that has enough scope to successfully exert its own influence and interests on the international stage. In a critique of Toynbee, I would argue that not only does a power need to have the necessary resources and political will to exert itself across the world, but also needs to have the recognition of being a great power by other foreign states and societies. As an example, Estonia in the modern-day cannot send troops to remote corners of the world or lead international coalitions at the United Nations, due to its limited resources and lack of ability to do so. By comparison, the United Kingdom does. Metaphorically, it has a seat at the table, and other states recognise the ability of the United Kingdom to impose itself on the international stage, therefore making it a global power.

In this essay, I will argue that great power competition amongst the great powers does threaten global security by analysing three major global powers: the United States (U.S. or America), the Russian Federation, and the People's Republic of China. Each of these countries has the ability to exert itself on an international stage as well as domestically, which is in coherence with the critique of Toynbee. Although, unlike the United States, Russia and China aspire to 'steal' America's position as world hegemon. Their ambitions to be the undisputed world power, currently, are just ambitions. As long as the United States, either in prosperity or decline, remains the world hegemon, the threats to security posed by China or Russia will remain constrained regionally, therefore not being a menace to global security.

The examination of great power competition being a threat to global security will be analysed by first looking at the United States. It will argue that due to the loss of American economic, manufacturing, and technological supremacy versus the other great powers, and its imperial overstretch, a term that will be scrutinised later on within the scope of this essay, they run the risk of no longer being the world hegemon; therefore risking global security in the process. The second great power considered will be Russia. Russia's great power competition will be gauged by its recently adopted policy of sovereign democracy, and how that affects its diplomatic relations with American policies, as well as how their natural resource exports influence the attitude other nations have toward Russia. The third nation to be assessed is China. China's growing economic entanglements and its 'soft power' strategies are generally considered to be a large threat to not only the position of America but also world peace. Though, as long as America remains the world hegemon, neither China nor Russia, will truly threaten global security, however much these countries wish to become the world power. Overall, the essay will take a Machiavellian view of great competition, meaning that the urge to compete and crush inferior nations is inbuilt in the concept of international relations. The 'victory or death' mentality of this world view means that the idea of great power competition, or even interaction, is a significant threat to global security and peace; this therefore would mean that with the diminishment of America, the preverbal 'vultures' have begun to circle waiting for their 'time in the sun'.

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Firstly, the discussion around great power competition threatening global security must start with discussions around the world's current, or now former, world hegemon — the United States (U.S.). The U.S. has been the sole world power since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and has been a strong presence on the international scene, arguably, since the end of the First World War. Currently, the United States' position no longer looks as solid as it has in previous decades, which invites other great powers to attempt to become the world hegemon, therefore threatening global security.

The primary factor in arguing for the U.S.'s decline causing great power competition with the other great powers, and therefore creating an unstable world, is the loss of the gigantic economic gap it has over other nations. For many years the U.S. was the predominant economic power in the world, especially with the collapse of the Soviet Union; the U.S. and the world viewed American economic power as unstoppable (Grunberg, 2005). However, with the emergence of China, the European Union, and India as possible economic rivals, the U.S.'s position is far from the one it had in the late 1990s. Kemp argues that due to the transfer of America's industries overseas, they became reliant on foreign powers and, therefore, diminished their position in the eyes of international powers. (Kemp, 1990). Kemp's analysis of the U.S. economic situation is, I believe, largely correct. For example, U.S. plastics manufacturing has largely moved into West Asia, especially China (China Briefing, 2011). America's howling out of its manufacturing and industrial base diminishes its status as a world hegemon because, no longer having its industry in its national territory, this allows China to gain a better position over America. The Sino-American industrial relationship is one of deceit and Machiavellian jostling due to the underhandedness of this dispute. As long as America is the dominant power in this relationship, however, global security will be largely secure as China will not dare to challenge America's power in open confrontations; China will wait until America is no longer a world hegemon.

Finkelstein argues that, unlike previous industrial revolutions that America has experienced, it will not be able to keep up with the 'Third Industrial Revolution' as he puts it. He argues that the U.S. will fail to grasp the opportunity to revolutionise its society and institutions in line with the technological innovations going on elsewhere: the invention of the computer, fibre optics, and improved missiles for example (Finkelstein, 1992). Although Finkelstein's analysis is now out of date, he hits on a crucial point relating to the attitude of American economic policy. Though America, unlike Finkelstein's viewpoint, maintained its position as a leader in technological development, it blundered the opportunity to limit other great powers in also improving their technological capabilities. For example, Russia's recent development of the Tsirkon 3M22 Missile, a hypersonic missile, has caused large concern on the international scene (Cole, 2021). This development of highly advanced military equipment is a by-product of America's failure to successfully maintain its technological dominance in the world. A decline of American technological hegemony is a large and consequential event for the concept of global security. Without its technological dominance, America will no longer be feared. The lack of fear, as seen in previous decades, allows other great powers, namely America's enemies, but also her allies, to challenge or subvert the world's peace in an attempt to profit from the existence of a power vacuum, which, therefore, threatens global security.

The economic, technological, and manufacturing situation of the United States is not hopeless, however; a declining nation is not a dead one, and recovery is always possible. In his book, *End This Depression Now!*, Krugman argues that strong and decisive economic stimuli must be made in order to pull America up from the depression it was in during the Obama administration (Krugman, 2013). If America manages to reverse its decline, then global security will be solidified. A stronger America would cause nations like China or Russia to not have the capabilities or desire to threaten global security without risking the reaction of America.

Furthermore, the American web of alliances and military engagements has caused its 'empire' to experience imperial overstretch. In the *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, Kennedy argues that the term imperial overstretch is when the power in question has "a vast array of strategical commitments which had been made decades earlier" (Kennedy, 1988). This assessment of a great power being overwhelmed by its obligations fits with the current position of America very well. Since the Second World War, America has, either intentionally or otherwise, found itself with international commitments that have a global reach. This concept is echoed by Burbach and Tarbell who argue that America aims to spread the Neo-Liberal model to "less sophisticated" nations (Burbach & Tarbell, 2004). This attempt to impose American ideology can be seen throughout the last century. The Vietnam War, military coups in

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South America, and U.S. military occupations in the Middle East are examples of this attempt to eradicate opposition to the American worldview. As a result of these incursions, America has worn its military capabilities too thin. If America's military might is stretched too thin across the world, or at the very least diminished, then the effects on the globe's security are significant as it leaves a power vacuum in less stable parts of the world where the U.S. has, depending on your attitude toward America, either occupied or liberated. This power vacuum will soon be occupied by another great power, causing conflict, disputes, and possible violence, which would cause global security to be in peril.

This idea of the U.S. being in terminal decline is challenged by Lieber. He downplays the urgency to fix America's problems. He argues that America, as well as previous world hegemony, has experienced decline and then rebounded from that decline (Lieber, 2012). This argument does carry with it some weight. For example, when the British Empire lost the Thirteen Colonies it was costly, being the most populous proportion of the Empire at that time (Canny, 1998, p. 92). However, even due to this significant loss, the British Empire went on to dominate the world, regaining its losses with the East India Company, Suez, and Hong Kong. This suggests that the U.S., though in decline, could, if it had the political will, reverse its misfortune, and regain its position as an undisputed world hegemon, therefore solidifying global security. However, even if the U.S. could reverse its decline due to its imperial overreach, the weakness America currently displays in its armed forces, especially after the chaos of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, highlights to other nations that it is no longer a force to be respected. Similar to the U.S. decline in technological and industrial capabilities, a lack of American presence causes the globe to be less secure as it invites competition to become the world hegemon.

Secondly, the position of Russia must be considered when debating whether great power competition threatens global security. Russia is an exceptionally traditional nation and has always, in my opinion, been separated from the powers of central and western Europe. This feeling of separation has caused Russia to become distrusting of The West — it forever wants to be 'part of the gang' and but enjoying the independence being ostracised brings with it. These two sides of Russia, Russia the West and Russia the mysterious, are the fundamental crux of its foreign policy, security tactics, and diplomatic actions.

In his book, *U.S. Regime Change and Great Power Assertiveness*, Tsygankov argued that the position Russia currently takes on the West is an attempt to protect European values and assert its sovereign democratic rights (Tsygankov, 2016). He argues that Russia views the world, and especially Europe, as a collection of independent states which have the right to govern themselves. I would argue that this is a largely correct analysis of Russia's position. In the now-famous speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, Putin fiercely defended Russia's right to maintain its sovereignty and argued that a unipolar world, the idea that world power stems from one state, was no longer feasible (President of Russia, 2007). This idea of a multipolar world is a cause for concern for the concept of global security. Without a strong and decisive centre of world power, the globe will descend into different nations acting in their interests, devoid of any supranational authority that can properly keep the world peace.

Also, Russia's current position in Europe has been stronger than it has been in previous historical periods. The fall of the Soviet Union, in 1991, brought with it nine years of political struggle and uncertainty. However, under the leadership of Putin, Russia has managed to turn its fortune. The new Russia should be a concern to the West, especially to the European Union. Lucas argues, quite correctly, that Russia's position in Europe is advantageous for its political and foreign policy, that being the upkeep of its democratic sovereignty, due to its strong oil and gas exports (Lucas, 2014, p. 213-217). The strong natural gas exports are mainly to Germany (Rystad Energy, 2020; Gazprom Export, 2021). This fact is significant, due to the broader ramifications between Russo-German relations, and to a greater extent, relations between Russia and the European Union. In a somewhat hypocritical move, Russia has managed to diminish the sovereignty of Germany, as well as many other oil and gas-dependent countries in Europe, to bolster its position on the world stage. In the context of great power competition threatening global security, an observer should not be surprised when dealing with hypocrisies in international relations. Russia's stranglehold on Germany, and other states of the world, is a cause for concern for the security of the world, as it allows Russia to act without proper international backlash. This could be seen in Germany's tepid response to Russia's incursions into Ukraine in 2013-14 (Spiegel, 2014). Russia's position in having such a large natural resource to export to Europe is a symptom of a larger problem. If a sovereign state can dictate through force, coerce,

To What Extent Is 'Great Power Competition' A Threat to Global Security?

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or manipulate another sovereign state into either acting or not acting in their interests, it poses a threat to global security, as it allows a state to act separately from the global community. If one great power can use Machiavellian tactics, such as manipulation and coercion, against another great power to achieve its strategic goals it causes a threat to global security. A state with all the power can wield significant damage to global security.

Overall, I would argue Russia's position is not one of massive international concern. The Russian threat, or what we Westerners perceive it to be, is not the massive bogeyman as it was in previous decades. With the Soviet Union dead, the Russian psyche must be one of defence first due to its massive loss of perceived friendly territory. And with NATO's expansion into what Russia could perceive as its sphere of influence, the West risks igniting tensions that shouldn't exist. Perhaps the duality that Russia seems to have only needs to be coaxed out to be a cooperative member of the European Community. A cooperative Russia would benefit not only peace in Europe but also global peace.

Lastly, when dealing with great power competition threatening global security, the role of China must be analysed. China has a rich and complex history and culture; from the Qin Empire to Xi Jinping, China's civilisation rivals that of even the great Empires of Europe. As Kissinger argues, in his book *On China*, the Chinese view themselves as having a national destiny to be, not only the dominant power in Asia but also the world hegemon (Kissinger, 2012). And with China's recent diplomatic feelers in the international arena, incursions into the South China Sea (Sevastopulo, 2021), and threats against Taiwan (Patel, 2021), they, like Russia, are testing the will of the West – but more specifically the United States. However, some argue that China cannot, and can never, become the world hegemon due to economic failings and domestic crises.

Though China boasts, and can rightly do so, of being the second-largest economy in the world (Research FDI, 2021), its economic capabilities are not as impressive as first thought. With Chinese economic modernisation came, similarly to the United States, international obligations. As Li argues, China has become too interdependent and connected to the world economy to be a major threat to global security (Li, 2004). This is somewhat correct as a great power like China cannot invade or wage a war on another power, whether it is against a minor power bordering China or a great power overseas. Concerning Li and similarly the American industry, China has developed an overreliance on the importation of minerals from Africa (Devaland, 2009). This overreliance on a foreign power's resources, in this case, minerals, is a large cause for concern as, like the ability of Russia to manipulate other European countries, China is influenced by another power.

Though China might not be able to threaten global security in the military sense, the great power jostling can be felt through diplomatic and financial means. China's attempts to wield soft power, to develop its position on the world stage, could be a cause for concern for global security. Dumbaugh (2008) is correct when arguing that China's infiltration of world organisations is an exercise in soft power. With China joining the World Trade Organisation in 2001 (WTO, 2001), and it is looking more likely that China will join The Trans-Pacific Trade pact (Reuters, 2021), just to name a few organisations, it suggests development in their soft power strategy. Its attempts at increasing its obligations, and therefore increasing the quantity of great power competition, have become more and more obvious. However, though China has undoubtedly advanced its position since the fall of the Soviet Union, I would argue that the threat China poses to global security through its competition with great powers, is largely minimal — and will be confined to China's immediate proximity. About Kissinger's argument, Hoo views Chinese foreign policy, during the Xi regime, as being fiercely China First (Hoo, 2018). This could be a problem for both global security and how other states interact with China, as a China that views whatever it does as infallible, it leaves no wiggle room to either compromise diplomatically, or avoid international crises: Therefore risking the escalation of conflict. Though China does not yet possess the title of world hegemon, I believe that its ambitions most definitely include that. The attempts, as Dumbaugh (2010) argues, to infiltrate world organisations is an attempt, like the United States, at spreading their influence to a greater extent than without these organisational groups being there. But, as long as the U.S. is the world power, then that impedes China, or for that case Russia, from becoming the world hegemon.

Overall, China's ambitions to become the world hegemon are undoubtedly there. The incursions into the South China Sea and the rustlings of overtaking the United States as the largest economic power are indications of this desire. Although, this desire will remain simply a dream as long as America remains top dog. The world may see significant

To What Extent Is 'Great Power Competition' A Threat to Global Security?

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threats to its security in regional areas (Indian-Chinese border, South China Sea, Korean Peninsula) in China's bid to become number one, but as long as the United States can maintain its position, global security will remain together.

In conclusion, the concept of great power competition threatening global security is undeniably obvious, the horrors of the 20th Century are simple reminders of this fact. However, with a world hegemon, those threats are far less significant, almost negligible. American power has and hopefully will, continue to bring order to the world. Though China and Russia, and other great powers, may envy the U.S. and wish to replace her as world hegemon, it is unlikely they will do so. As long as America can be more Machiavellian than that the other powers and retain its national cohesion, global security will remain secure for the foreseeable future.

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To What Extent Is 'Great Power Competition' A Threat to Global Security?

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