

On Great Power Conflict: Entangled or Untangled Alliances?

An Interview with Charles A. Kupchan

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SSQ: Can you offer a general historical view of alliances in preserving peace and preventing conflict?

CAK: Historically, alliances have tended to be tools of warfare more than they have been tools of deterrence. In that sense, the Cold War may have been a bit of an outlier because war never occurred between NATO and the Warsaw Pact—most likely because of the presence of nuclear weapons. The alliances that formed when Sparta faced off with Athens, the Quadruple Alliance that opposed Napoleon, the Triple Entente in WWI—they were all associated with war. We could likely find other alliances that were not associated with war, but I suspect these would be the exception and not the rule. NATO is an anomaly in another respect: it is still here almost three decades after the end of the Cold War. Most alliances disappear when the threat that brought them into being disappears. But that has not happened with NATO. Because it has been very good at adapting to geopolitical circumstances—such as going out of area, dealing with unconventional threats, and building global partnerships—NATO has been the exception and not the rule.

SSQ: Has the historical view of alliances changed since the end of the Cold War?

CAK: Especially in the 1990s, NATO viewed itself as a political organization more than as a traditional military alliance. NATO adapted and was no longer focused on territorial defense against an external aggressor. It became more of an all-purpose institution for military and nonmilitary cooperation in Europe and beyond.

One consequence of the changing character of NATO was that it was used as a tool for promoting democracy and helping facilitate reform in the new democracies emerging from the Soviet Union. That role was an appropriate one, but it also entailed the formal enlargement of NATO. Enlargement was, in my mind, a mistake. I was opposed to NATO expan-

sion because of my concerns about its effect on Russia. Alliance decision-makers underestimated the degree to which Russia sees NATO as a threat, as a military alliance encroaching on its sphere of influence. The United States certainly would respond with alarm if Russia formed a military alliance with Mexico and Canada and deployed Russian troops near the US border. As a consequence, we are now in an awkward position where NATO pledged to make Ukraine and Georgia NATO members at its 2008 summit. Some now realize that may not be a wise thing to do. Indeed, Russia now has troops in both countries—in part to block their path to NATO membership. Russia's aggressive behavior has in turn encouraged NATO to focus more on its traditional mission of territorial defense.

SSQ: In the case of NATO, is the alliance more likely to draw the US into a great power conflict or prevent such a conflict?

CAK: NATO is more likely to prevent a conflict and preserve stability, at least for now. Russia has been probing the gray zones such as Georgia and Ukraine but not NATO territory. The Russians are not going to test Article 5, which serves as an effective deterrent. It is also important not to underestimate the political and social consequences of NATO. It remains the premier institution that binds North America to Europe's democracies at a time when democratic norms and institutions are being tested by the rise of populism on both sides of the Atlantic. NATO plays an important role in consolidating transatlantic solidarity and cooperation. That role is important today in light of illiberal trends among Western democracies and the illiberal agenda of powers like Russia and China. Despite the transatlantic tensions that have emerged during the Trump presidency, the alliance is actually in very good shape. NATO militaries are working together closely, and European defense spending is rising. Publics on both sides of the Atlantic continue to support the alliance. The US Congress has repeatedly made clear its backing of NATO. These are all signs of the health of the alliance at a time of political strain.

SSQ: If Russia violates Article 5 provisions of the NATO treaty, to what extent should the US react?

CAK: Treaty commitments are sacrosanct. One of the pillars of a rules-based system is for nations to live by their commitments. They do not cherry-pick. They don't only show up on a sunny day and disappear on a rainy day. The US should stand by its Article 5 commitments if the Russians test those commitments whether it concerns Estonia, Latvia, Poland, or any other member. We should lead a coalition to defend the territory of

alliance members. If the US were to fail to uphold its NATO commitments, it would raise doubts about US commitments globally—in Asia, the Middle East, everywhere.

SSQ: Will US alliances and agreements with Indo-Pacific nations precipitate or likely restrain a great power conflict?

CAK: In the end, US commitments in the Indo-Pacific are a source of stability. The presence of the US in South Korea, Japan, Guam, and other forward locations helps prevent the regional jockeying and balancing that would otherwise occur. The Chinese may complain about the US presence; however, in many respects they benefit from that presence because it helps prevent an arms race in China's neighborhood. Japan and South Korea could seek nuclear weapons in the absence of a US commitment to their security. Over the long term, one would hope East Asia could pursue a self-sustaining regional project of integration that would make it unnecessary for the US to remain the extra-regional guarantor. But this outcome depends a great deal on how China exercises its growing power. If rapprochement and cooperation are to emerge among the region's nations, China's neighbors need to believe that Beijing has benign strategic intentions. That is not now the case. However, it is unlikely that the US will be the strategic guarantor of East Asia indefinitely. A key challenge of our time is managing the relationship between the US and China. America has only one peer competitor on the horizon: China. That makes the US-China relationship a defining one for the twenty-first century.

SSQ: Are some US alliance agreements in the Indo-Pacific more likely to create the conditions for great power conflict?

CAK: Taiwan has to be on the top of the list of territories in East Asia that could precipitate great power conflict. Some accidental event could precipitate hostilities—for example, a collision between a Chinese vessel and a US vessel in the South China Sea. Of course, there have been airborne incidents already. Other pathways to conflict are increased nationalist sentiment in Taiwan that leads to a formal declaration of independence or events in China that ramp up nationalism and the pressure it exerts on Taiwan. However, today, the likelihood of a deliberate war between China and Taiwan is less likely than hostilities stemming from an inadvertent escalation.

SSQ: If China forcefully violates a US agreement with an Asian partner, to what extent should the US respond?

CAK: Just as I said with reference to NATO, treaty commitments are sacrosanct. If they start to unravel, the rules-based international system

starts to unravel. It is in the US interest to facilitate conversations between China and Taiwan and to help de-escalate tensions as the two parties search for a permanent settlement. Until that comes about, the US should stand by its commitments.

SSQ: What do you see as the prospects of a great power conflict in this century?

CAK: The rise of China has considerable potential to lead to the kind of geopolitical tensions that are usually associated with hegemonic transitions. China's push into the South China Sea, trade tensions between the US and China, growing anti-US sentiment in China, and growing anti-China sentiment in the US—there is much to worry about. The bipartisan consensus in the US is to take a hard line against China. In China, the same consensus exists—to stand up to the US on most fronts.

Let me offer two caveats when it comes to the prospect of great power conflict. First, nuclear weapons have so far done a good job of averting great power war; they should encourage caution and restraint in the US-China relationship. The second caveat is interdependence: the US and China are much more entangled economically than the US and Soviets were. That means a stronger mutual interest in containing geopolitical rivalry. On the security front, things will continue to be rocky—even more so than now. The Chinese are uncomfortable with US naval primacy in the Pacific. They are developing capabilities that will test that primacy. The US is likely to hold its ground. The key question going forward is whether restraint or confrontation will prevail. Economic interdependence can help, but the US-China relationship will ultimately turn on the core geopolitical issues in play.

SSQ: What steps should the US and its international alliance partners take to prevent a great power conflict?

CAK: Transparency and communication are extremely important. I worry about the degree to which Russia's narrative of global affairs is so different than the one that exists in the US and other Western democracies. It is important to agree on a set of shared facts, especially when it comes to Ukraine, Syria, and Russian interference in democratic elections. Those shared facts don't exist right now.

The US should be more sensitive to the realistic and legitimate security concerns of other great powers. As I mentioned earlier, it doesn't make sense for NATO to be expanding into Russia's underbelly. The US and China should similarly look for ways to become more comfortable with

each other's intentions. China's rise does mean that its security interests are expanding. When the US emerged as a great power, it unveiled the Monroe Doctrine and eased the UK, France, Spain, and Russia out of its neighborhood. That is what great powers do as they rise. A broadening of China's ambitions is to be expected. However, China also needs to moderate its ambition so as not to threaten others. Moving forward, the US, China, and other regional players will need to engage in a conversation about security and responsibility in the Indo-Pacific. The best outcome would be an adjustment to the rise of China that occurs in a consensual and peaceful fashion.

SSQ: What steps should China and Russia take to prevent a great power conflict?

CAK: In the case of Russia, it needs to stop playing the role of spoiler in an effort to undermine a rules-based international system. It works to tear down that system without offering anything in its place. Its actions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria; its ongoing interference in democratic elections in other countries; its violation of the INF Treaty—these and other actions give the US every reason to be suspicious of Russian intentions and to behave accordingly toward the Kremlin. Have we made mistakes in our policies and missed opportunities to deepen cooperation with Russia? Yes, we have. But it is Russia that backed away from the “reset” that took place during the Obama presidency. Putin returned to the Russian presidency and has ever since embraced a brand of leadership that relies on standing up to the West as his main source of legitimacy. Instead of governing by manipulating Russian nationalism, he should start investing in the Russian people, building a knowledge economy, and weaning the Russian economy from its dependence on energy revenue. Russia needs to become a stakeholder in the international system rather than a troublemaker.

China has been a more cautious player than Russia. Only recently has China gone from a near-exclusive focus on growing its economy to also pushing out geopolitically. It is too early to tell if China's rise will be accompanied by strategic caution and restraint—or aggressive intent. Bullying of its neighbors over disputed islands and militarization of offshore outposts are not reassuring signs. Ideally, the US and China should find a way to mutually chart a path for China's rise that does not involve confrontation. Strategic restraint by both parties will help.

SSQ: Should the US seek to deepen our commitments to existing alliances and seek new ones with new partners?

CAK: The US is in retrenchment mode. The political climate moving forward will be to do less, not more, and allies will be pressed to share more of the defense burden. President Obama campaigned on the idea of nation building at home, and President Trump adopted a neo-isolationist agenda. Both have had problems operationalizing retrenchment, but they accurately perceived that the electorate is looking to scale back overseas commitments. “Endless” wars in the Middle East have taken their toll. So expect the US to lighten its footprint abroad. In the first instance, this retrenchment will come not by backing away from existing alliances but by getting out of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Iran of course is a wild card. President Trump has said he doesn’t want a war with Iran. He prefers to offload commitments, not take on new ones. But tensions with Iran have the potential to escalate and lead to conflict—whether inadvertent or deliberate. The trend line will be an America that does less abroad, but not in a way that compromises treaty-based alliance commitments—at least for now. Perhaps smart diplomacy and processes of rapprochement can over time make at least some alliances unnecessary.

SSQ: Is it unrealistic to think the US and China or Russia could establish some kind of formal regional or international alliance?

CAK: After WWII, Pax Americana emerged and the US and its democratic partners became the overseers of a liberal international order. After the end of the Cold War, more countries joined that liberal order. Now history seems to be going in reverse. Illiberal forces have been gaining strength in Western democracies, and the rules-based international order is being threatened from within by these forces and from without by Russia and China. It is too early to tell how these trends will play out. I think the top geopolitical priority for the United States and other Western democracies is to get their own houses in order: address economic uncertainty, put in place functioning and effective immigration policies, and restore trust in and the effectiveness of democratic institutions. Otherwise, this illiberal “moment” may last a very long time.

Whether or not the Western democracies recover and reclaim liberal values and practices, the global landscape is fast changing toward multipolarity. As a consequence, for the first time in history, the world will be globalized and interdependent but no longer led by a coalition of liberal great powers. We are headed toward “No One’s World”—a world in which there will be no captain at the helm. Accordingly, the best option for pre-

serving stability and fashioning a new rules-based world may be a global concert of major players. The US, the European Union, Russia, China, Japan, India, Brazil, the Arab League, and the African Union—perhaps an informal grouping along these lines can contribute to efforts to arrive at a cooperative means of managing global affairs.

SSQ: Do alliances have a future in the liberal international order?

CAK: Yes, I think they do. We still live in a world in which geopolitical threats and uncertainty require the stability and predictability that come with alliance networks. It would be desirable to move to a world in which alliances are no longer needed. President Woodrow Wilson aspired to that world but failed to achieve it. In some ways, NATO began to move in that direction immediately after the end of the Cold War—becoming a vehicle for broad-based military cooperation rather than one focused on collective defense. It has to a certain extent become an all-purpose security organization with partners around the world. Now, however, it has also had to focus once more on its traditional role of balancing against a Russia that has of late demonstrated malign intent. Especially as the world becomes more multipolar and prone to power balancing, don't expect alliances to disappear.

SSQ: Dr. Kupchan, on behalf of team *SSQ* and the *SSQ* audience, thank you for sharing your ideas on how alliances may be the deciding factor in a future clouded by the prospect of great power conflict. **SSQ**

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