Opportunistic Aggression in the Twenty-first Century

Hal Brands & Evan Braden Montgomery


To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2020.1792129

Published online: 22 Jul 2020.

Article views: 318

View related articles

View Crossmark data
In 415 BCE, after six years of peace, the second phase of the Peloponnesian War began when Athens launched a military expedition to Sicily. That expedition, however, suddenly allowed Sparta to impose a heavy toll on its long-time adversary. As its forces confronted a deteriorating situation on the ground, Athens opted to dispatch additional troops rather than accept defeat, which convinced Sparta to invade Attica and sever its rival’s overland supply lines. In the words of Thucydides, ‘what chiefly encouraged the Spartans to act with energy was their belief that Athens, with two wars on her hands – one against them and one against the Sicilians – would be now easier to crush’.¹

Two centuries later, during the Second Punic War, Rome faced a similar situation. Following a series of battlefield setbacks at the hands of the Carthaginians, the Romans unexpectedly found themselves defending their eastern flank against the Macedonians. According to Polybius’s account, when news of Rome’s loss at Lake Trasimene reached Greece, an adviser to King Philip V of Macedonia encouraged the ambitious young ruler to exploit the situation: ‘This is the moment to strike a blow, when
the Romans have suffered a disastrous defeat. After the calamitous Battle of Cannae, Philip V not only formed an alliance with Hannibal Barca, the famed Carthaginian general, but also saw an opening to expand into Roman client states in nearby Illyria. Despite the ongoing threat from Carthaginian forces on the Italian peninsula, the possibility that Macedonia could extend its influence over the Balkans and undercut Rome’s position in the region led to a conflict that continued for a decade and ended without any significant Roman gains.

As these examples show, opportunistic aggression – one of the most dreaded but least examined strategic problems confronting the United States today – has a long lineage. Great powers commonly find themselves saddled with commitments that exceed their available resources. The extreme version of this situation – the nightmare scenario – is facing two or more wars simultaneously. With this danger in mind, American defence planners have long sought to ensure that the United States has the capability to wage more than one conflict at a time. Today, however, in recognition of its resource limitations and a deteriorating security environment, the United States has adopted a defence strategy focused on defeating a single major power – either China or Russia – rather than two lesser threats at once. This means that the US military might be overtaxed and perhaps even overwhelmed should it have to deal with more than one military challenge. And because an overstretched superpower is a tempting target, the United States must reckon with the possibility of opportunistic aggression: an adversary attempting to change the status quo while Washington is preoccupied. In a particularly grave scenario, one major power might exploit a conflict between the United States and another major power to wage a war for regional dominance in Eastern Europe or the Western Pacific.

Despite the ominous salience of this scenario, opportunistic aggression occupies an uneasy place in US defence strategy. On the one hand, the need to prevent or respond to this threat has been an article of faith among defence planners for decades. Consequently, it has had a significant influence on the size, shape and posture of the US armed forces. On the other hand, there has been relatively little scholarly work that explores how frequently it arises.
Opportunistic Aggression in the Twenty-first Century

Opportunistic aggression can change the status quo

and what forms it can take. Because the United States has now adopted a one-war strategy, the fortunes of that strategy will hinge, in part, on the likelihood of opportunistic aggression. If it is a genuine threat, a one-war strategy could create dangerous, even disastrous, vulnerabilities. If not, the risks of a one-war strategy are probably modest.

In fact, opportunistic aggression is not a phantom menace conjured up by overanxious defence planners. It has occurred many times, from antiquity to the Cold War, and in many forms, sometimes with devastating consequences. There are also several plausible pathways by which opportunistic aggression against the United States and its interests could arise today. The canonical scenario – one enemy launching a major war while America is already fighting another enemy – cannot be discounted given America’s geopolitical circumstances. But opportunistic aggression encompasses a spectrum of options, from coalition war fighting to proxy conflict to cut-throat diplomacy. It can unfold without a shot being fired; it can change the geopolitical status quo without a second war being started. These subtler aspects of the phenomenon are not as well understood, but they also have the potential to create big problems for an overstretched superpower.

Moreover, there is no silver bullet for dealing with the threat of opportunistic aggression. The surest way would be to spend more money on the defence capabilities that would allow Washington to reliably deter or wage more than one conflict at a time, but that seems infeasible given resource constraints that could get much tighter as a result of the fiscal fallout from COVID-19. That reality may tempt American officials to consider a variety of poor man’s options, from cutting deals with adversaries to threatening asymmetric escalation in a second war. Yet if some of these options look appealing on paper, they could prove difficult or dangerous to execute. The United States may or may not decide to make the military investments required to significantly buy down the risk associated with opportunistic aggression. But policymakers should not fool themselves into thinking that there are easy, low-cost alternatives to keeping that threat at bay.
An overview of opportunistic aggression

Opportunistic aggression commonly means the use of force by a challenger when its enemy is already fighting another war. The logic underpinning this danger is straightforward: if deterrence is a function of the perceived capability and perceived willingness of a defender to uphold the status quo, then involvement in a confrontation with one adversary raises the risk of deterrence failure vis-à-vis another. All things equal, a state that is fighting one war will have fewer forces available to fight a second. It should also prefer to avoid an additional conflict so that it can concentrate on winning the first. This dynamic creates an opening for a new challenger to strike.⁹

The possibility of opportunistic aggression looms whenever a state faces two or more competitors, which is not uncommon for most major powers. Continental powers such as Imperial Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union each had to wrestle with concurrent rivalries, which created difficult trade-offs and even had fatal consequences in some cases, especially when states went on the offensive in ill-advised attempts to address multiple threats on their own terms.¹⁰ Opportunistic aggression seems to be a particular bane of global maritime powers. These states often face multiple rivals and have a variety of economic interests and security commitments across multiple regions. During its long period of global dominance, for example, the United Kingdom contended with numerous existing and potential rivals, such as Germany, France, Japan, Russia and the United States, not to mention frequent conflicts with local actors along the imperial periphery.¹¹

The prospect of opportunistic aggression has also created recurring dilemmas for the United States. From the late 1940s through the early 1970s, Washington faced challenges from both the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. Throughout the Cold War, moreover, it undertook military engagements in places such as Korea and Vietnam, which risked creating openings for the Soviet Union. As a result, avoiding opportunistic aggression was a prominent objective in US defence strategy. During the 1960s, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations committed (rhetorically, at least) to building a two-and-a-half (2.5) war capability that would allow Washington to fight wars against the Soviet Union, Communist China and one smaller power simultaneously, thereby decreasing the ability of
one communist rival to exploit an American showdown with another. Even after the 2.5-war standard was rendered unnecessary by the US–China rapprochement, the United States maintained a 1.5-war standard so that it could fight a minor conflict somewhere in the world without tempting the Soviet Union to attack in Europe or elsewhere.12

After the Cold War, the concept of opportunistic aggression became even more central to US defence strategy. Although the United States no longer faced a rival superpower, it confronted challenges from three rogue powers – Iran, Iraq and North Korea – across two distant theatres. US officials feared that a conflict on the Korean Peninsula might incentivise Iran or Iraq to expand in the Middle East, or that a conflict in the Middle East might tempt North Korea to lash out at its neighbours in Northeast Asia.13 For more than two decades, the United States maintained a force designed to handle two major regional contingencies simultaneously or nearly simultaneously. As the 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review explained, ‘maintaining this core capability is central to deterring opportunism – that is, to avoiding a situation in which an aggressor in one region might be tempted to take advantage when US forces are heavily committed elsewhere’.14

The two-war construct was premised on the idea that the United States would be squaring off against relatively weak rivals. The current security environment is more dangerous, however, and the risk of opportunistic aggression appears to be on the rise, for three reasons. Firstly, the number of serious challengers has increased. Today, the United States is planning for potential conflicts against five different actors (China, Iran, North Korea, Russia and major terrorist organisations) across at least three different theatres. Secondly, the strength of individual competitors has increased. China and Russia are far more capable militarily than any of the rogue states that the United States sought to contain after the Cold War.15 Thirdly, the level of coordination between US rivals has grown. China and Russia have forged a diplomatic partnership that features heightened military cooperation and raises the possibility that they might work together during a confrontation with the United States.16 For these reasons, it is important that American strategists begin to think more carefully, and with greater nuance, about the possibility of opportunistic aggression.
The history of opportunistic aggression

Opportunistic aggression has not been a rare or trivial occurrence. In fact, it has been the cause of important wars and the source of serious great-power defeats. Opportunistic aggression comes in a wide variety of forms that go beyond our conventional understanding of the concept. And although some, such as conflict initiation and conflict intervention, entail the use of force, others, such as assertive bargaining and military build-ups, do not.

The type of opportunistic aggression that captures the most rapt attention of strategists and planners is overt military action. The most straightforward mode is conflict initiation: an opportunist aggressor starts a war that is largely independent of whatever war its target is already fighting, for instance by seizing undefended territory, settling a local score, carving out a sphere of influence or inflicting a direct blow against the target. That puts the defender in the position of fighting on two fronts unless it chooses to accept an immediate loss on one of them. Whether conflict initiation entails directly attacking a preoccupied foe or assaulting its overseas interests, the aggressor is exploiting a window of opportunity to alter the status quo.

During the Napoleonic Wars, the fact that Britain had its hands full encouraged other states to pursue their interests at its expense. In 1812, with issues such as commerce restrictions and naval impressment heightening Anglo-American tensions, the United States displayed a limited tolerance for negotiations and was quick to settle these disputes by force, due in part to Britain’s ongoing conflict against France. In fact, Washington opted for war – partially in hopes of achieving revisionist ambitions such as the conquest of Canada – only shortly before learning that London had conceded the main source of their quarrel by repealing its restrictions on neutral trade. Britain had little desire to fight the United States given its heavy commitments against Napoleon Bonaparte. In London, the War of 1812 was ‘seen as a stab in England’s back, treacherously delivered during a desperate crusade against the tyrant of Europe’.

The first half of the twentieth century also saw opportunistic conflict initiation, with enormous consequences for regional and global stability. In multiple cases, Japan – a revisionist state that aspired to dominate the Asia-Pacific region – was the perpetrator. In 1914, Tokyo recognised that the
outbreak of war in Europe would ‘upset the whole balance of power in East Asia’ and leave Japan ‘free to pursue its ambitions almost without check’. Shortly after the conflict began, it occupied German-leased territory in China and seized German colonies in the South Pacific. Twenty-five years later, when the Second World War again threw the European continent into chaos, Japan saw another opportunity to create a vast sphere of influence. Indeed, one of the main debates among Japanese cabinet members was whether to exploit the opportunity created by the defeat of the Netherlands, the fall of France and the anticipated collapse of the UK to advance into Southeast Asia, or instead to take advantage of the unanticipated German attack against the Soviet Union to expand north out of Manchuria. Tokyo chose the former option, although it also hoped to attack a beleaguered Soviet Union at a later date, much like a ‘jackal state’ that was ‘ready to jump in for the choice pickings of a kill made by others’.

Starting a separate war is not the only mode of opportunistic aggression. Rather than initiating a new campaign, an aggressor might opt for conflict intervention. For instance, an opportunistic aggressor could turn a bilateral war into a coalition war by allying with its rival’s opponent to augment that opponent’s strength, thus inflicting a sharp blow on a shared enemy. Alternatively, an opportunistic aggressor could turn a bilateral war into a proxy war by employing low-profile methods to extend a conflict’s duration, heighten its intensity and increase the toll it takes on an adversary.

In 1585, for example, England openly agreed to supply money and troops to Dutch rebels fighting for independence against its rival, Spain, which helped them hold out against what was then the world’s strongest power. In 1778, France formally sided with American revolutionaries in their war for independence from Great Britain, providing money and supplies as well as troops and naval power. In helping the Americans prevail, Paris inflicted payback on London for its earlier defeat in the Seven Years War, secured or regained imperial territories, and weakened England so that it could not support France’s continental rivals. And in June 1940, Italy opportunistically invaded France one month after Germany did. ‘The hand that held the dagger has struck it into the back of its neighbor’, Franklin Roosevelt remarked.
As for less overt cases of intervention, the second half of the twentieth century saw numerous instances of superpower proxy wars. The Soviets intervened covertly in Korea, sending pilots and fighter aircraft to bolster North Korea’s air defences. Moscow also provided lethal anti-aircraft weapons and other support to North Vietnam to raise the cost of US intervention in Southeast Asia. Moscow’s reasoning, Richard Nixon lamented, was that ‘the war in Vietnam costs the Soviet Union only a small amount of money and costs the US a great many lives’. Washington later took revenge by supporting Afghan guerrillas after the Kremlin stumbled into its own version of Vietnam, inflicting high costs on an overextended Soviet Union.

Other forms of aggressive opportunism can alter the status quo or impose costs without firing a shot. In the near term, a state’s involvement in a war can reduce its leverage and leave it with little choice but to accept harsh demands from third parties watching from the sidelines. After Germany’s initial victories in 1939 and 1940 defeated or pressured European powers with colonial holdings in Asia, British and American leaders feared that Japan would exploit the situation to press diplomatic demands. Indeed, Tokyo pushed the Dutch to provide critical raw materials from Southeast Asia. It also insisted that the UK and Vichy France close the Burma Road that was used to supply the Chinese nationalists in their war against the Japanese. Not least, Tokyo demanded that the Vichy regime give it access to air bases in Indochina and allow transit of Japanese troops through that territory. Although Vichy officials agreed, Japan attacked French forces in northern Indochina and eventually invaded southern Indochina as well.

Over the long term, a state’s engagement in a protracted conflict can also enable its rival to shift the balance of power (or make the existing balance of power more expensive to sustain) through determined military modernisation. With the United States embroiled in Vietnam, the Soviet Union undertook a significant conventional build-up in Europe as well as a rapid build-up of its strategic nuclear forces. ‘While we have been heavily engaged in Southeast Asia’, then-secretary of defense Melvin Laird commented in 1971, ‘the Soviet Union has built a military momentum relative to the US in virtually all aspects of military strength’. More recently, as the United States became preoccupied with wars in Afghanistan and Iraq,
China accelerated a massive modernisation effort designed to coerce its neighbours and counter US intervention. ‘China is reshaping the military order in Asia’, a Pentagon official remarked in 2008, ‘and it is doing so at our expense’. 32 In both cases, the costs of war – in money, materiel, personnel and attention – created a window of opportunity for a competitor to alter the military balance.

Future opportunistic aggression against the US

Although opportunistic aggression has been a genuine problem in the past, predicting when, where and how it might occur in the future is difficult. For one thing, a revisionist power’s decision to engage in or forgo aggression will be based on more than whether its rival is preoccupied: just because a window of opportunity opens, a state will not necessarily jump through it. 33 If the United States were already suffering losses in a conflict, a revisionist spectator would see an increase in its relative power without ever taking any risks. Any decision to go to war, by any rival, would presumably reflect a variety of geopolitical and domestic calculations, some of which have little to do with perceptions of American distraction. Nevertheless, Washington’s geopolitical situation does create an inherent risk of opportunistic aggression, and by working through the various possibilities we can get a better sense of where the danger really lies.

To start, although American planners have worried for decades about simultaneous conflicts with two minor powers, Washington should probably worry more today about a contingency involving at least one of its great-power rivals given the capabilities they can bring to bear and the damage they could inflict on the US-led international system. Theoretically, this could occur in a variety of ways. One major power might opt for aggression while the United States is busy dealing with another, which has the potential to become a worst-case scenario if Russia and China launch large-scale wars simultaneously or fight together as allies. Alternatively, a major power could make a move while the United States is focused on North Korea or Iran. Lastly, a major power might play the role of a catalyst rather than the opportunist; that is, a fight with Russia or China might open the door to aggression by North Korea or Iran.
Several factors could influence what specific forms these threats take and whether they arise at all. For example, opportunistic conflict initiation should depend in part on Washington’s perceived willingness and ability to redirect its forces from one fight to another, especially since it does not presently have the resources to wage two wars at once. If the Pentagon can quickly win the first conflict and pivot to the second, that should enhance the deterrence of potential opportunists. By contrast, a slow victory or stalemate would keep US forces busy and make opportunistic aggression more attractive. At the same time, if the stakes are comparatively low in the first war, Washington might be willing to cut its losses and tackle the second, which should help keep opportunists on guard. But if the stakes are high in the first contingency, the United States might feel forced to fight on despite competing demands, which makes opportunism more likely.

In addition, opportunistic conflict intervention should be contingent on geographic constraints, which will affect the amount and type of support that one aggressor could provide to another. Specifically, a revisionist state would have a limited capacity to openly assist another actor and operate together as a coalition if these potential allies were located far apart, especially since most US rivals have been emphasising military capabilities designed to project force in their own neighbourhoods rather than into other regions. An opportunist should also be reluctant to support another state if the risk of retaliation outstrips the estimated reward of bloodletting, which suggests that deniable or ambiguous methods of assistance would make this type of intervention more attractive.

These considerations offer several broad takeaways. Firstly, there are some threats that strategists and planners can probably afford to worry less about, even if they should not be dismissed entirely. For instance, there are reasons to doubt that a major power would actually start a second war while the United States is fighting a minor power – that Russia would use a US conflict with Iran to make a land grab in the Baltic region, or that China would exploit it to invade Taiwan. In these cases, the opportunistic power
might well anticipate a rapid US victory over the smaller power, while the comparatively low stakes of the initial conflict suggest that Washington might simply choose to shift its focus if confronted with a bigger, more important fight.

The obvious caveat here involves a situation in which a major-power aggressor believes that it only needs a very brief window of opportunity to achieve its gains. Russia, for instance, might assess that it could overpower limited NATO forces or simply seize a relatively small chunk of lightly defended territory in the Baltic region before the US could react, severely testing and perhaps discrediting NATO’s Article V guarantee.\textsuperscript{34} Many US analysts deem this scenario plausible given the balance of military power in key areas. But even if an opportunistic great power calculated that a brief delay in the American response would be sufficient to accomplish a limited military objective that delivered a big strategic pay-off, it would still be taking a major risk on its ability to win quickly and decisively. This might make such a gamble less attractive.\textsuperscript{35}

The likelihood of confronting a great-power coalition is even lower. To be sure, both Russia and China would have strong incentives to aid one another in a contest with the United States. Although their relationship is still marked by tensions and high levels of mistrust, neither Moscow nor Beijing would wish to see its fellow authoritarian power defeated by Washington for fear that the US would then focus more of its energies on the remaining challenger.\textsuperscript{36} Both powers might also be tempted to turn a major war into a ‘Suez moment’ for the United States – a decisive defeat that would undermine its prestige and power for years, creating openings for more ambitious authoritarian revisionism.\textsuperscript{37} But even though Russia and China have conducted combined exercises in various locales, distance dictates that they can probably fight together only in Northeast Asia.\textsuperscript{38} Moreover, even if Russia had an opportunity to assist China in a conflict against the United States and Japan in the East China Sea, it might not want to advance the strategic cause of a contiguous rising power with expansionist ambitions, especially one that would no longer need to divide its attention. While Russia would not want China to decisively lose a war with the United States, it might not want it to decisively win one, either.
Secondly, some threats strategists and planners fear are very real. The possibility of dual great-power wars—say, a Chinese assault on Taiwan followed by a Russian attack in the Baltic region—is more plausible than many sceptics might accept. Not only does Washington lack the capabilities to win both fights at once, or even to win a single fight quickly, but a loss in either scenario could shatter key US alliances. That is, the speed of victory would probably be low while the interests at stake would undoubtedly be high. A window of opportunity for a second power would open once it recognised that Washington was not in a position to shift focus and conduct another campaign. Given the geopolitical rewards that a victory over a distracted United States would bring, this possibility might look quite attractive to revisionist leaders in Moscow or Beijing. If Russian President Vladimir Putin wished to fracture NATO and push the Alliance back from Russia’s borders, he would never have a better chance than during a Sino-American war that brings the US military to the very limit.

This risk might be even higher than currently assessed due to Russia’s or China’s ability to shift the geopolitical status quo by taking relatively limited military actions. A 1914-style offensive would not be required for Russia to seize Narva or otherwise commit aggression in the Baltics, perhaps by ambiguous means, or for China to violently assert itself against one of its neighbours in the South China Sea. Both countries could pursue such goals via limited actions of relatively short duration, meant to create new realities that would be disproportionately expensive and deadly for America and its allies to reverse. If the calculation is that Beijing or Moscow needs only a short period of time to violently revise the status quo in its near abroad, then the intense American preoccupation created by a war with the other authoritarian power would provide an alluring opportunity.

The prospect of a minor power starting a war while the United States is fighting a major power is also a serious one, even if it is somewhat less dangerous than a dual great-power war scenario. Because the US would be embroiled in a high-stakes conflict with a low probability of quick success, a minor power would have increased freedom of action to take advantage. If Iran sought to initiate a coercive military campaign against the Gulf
Cooperation Council countries, for example, the optimal time would be when the United States was deeply committed elsewhere.

Great-power intervention in a US war against a minor power is also plausible. Major powers are unlikely to side directly with minor powers to create the threat of a coalition war, due to geographic constraints as well as a risk–reward disparity. The added damage they could inflict on the United States probably would not outweigh the costs they would suffer compared to those of remaining on the sidelines and watching Washington fight. Russia could send some aircraft and naval combatants into a US–Iran war in the Middle East, for instance, but those capabilities probably would not change the ultimate outcome. (If China intervened in a US–North Korea war, it would likely be to preserve a geographical buffer on its borders and not to help Pyongyang win.) Nevertheless, a major power might see a US conflict with Iran or North Korea as a low-cost chance to bleed the US by providing its opponent with weapons or other assets it could use to increase the price America would pay, especially if they were not so advanced that their origins would be obvious. The more the United States suffers today in a war against Iran or North Korea, the thinking might go, the harder it will be for the US to thwart Russian or Chinese ambitions in the future. The efforts need not be covert, merely low-profile enough that the United States does not feel compelled to respond. During the Korean War, for instance, American officials strongly suspected that Soviet pilots were flying combat missions, but they chose not to make an issue of it for fear of worsening tensions and potentially provoking an expanded war at a time of US vulnerability.

Thirdly, there are a number of credible scenarios that warrant more attention than they are getting. For instance, although Russia and China might not band together in a coalition, they might still aid each other in a conflict with the United States on a more discreet and limited basis. For instance, either country could quietly provide arms or intelligence to the other, or it could employ hard-to-attribute, non-kinetic measures such as cyber attacks and disinformation campaigns to hinder the mobilisation and deployment of American forces. Either major power could also undertake

Russia and
China might
aid each other
subtle military moves – such as massing forces near a potential hotspot – to give the United States pause by demonstrating that it would be vulnerable in other areas if it fully committed to the first theatre.\textsuperscript{45} If the goal were simply to prevent the United States from winning decisively, or to increase the costs it suffers from a great-power contest, Moscow and Beijing would have options.

At the same time, the United States should be on guard for major-power efforts to alter the status quo without firing a shot. Precisely because a US war against Russia or China would so consume America’s combat power and so test America’s global position, it would create extremely high incentives for the United States and its allies to ensure that another conflict did not erupt at the same time. That, in turn, would create opportunities for revisionists on the sidelines, Russia and China most of all, to posture for advantage. Beijing and Moscow have so far been hesitant actually to use force against the United States and its allies. In this light, blackmail, whether obvious or subtle, could be very appealing in a crisis.\textsuperscript{46}

Russia might seek as the price of its neutrality concessions from the West on Ukraine, the security architecture of Eastern Europe or the resolution of the civil war in Syria. It could punctuate those demands by posturing forces that would enable it to take stronger action if Washington and its allies refused. China could perceive similar openings amid a US–Russian showdown. It might demand economic or political concessions from Taiwan designed to limit that island’s sovereignty, assuming that the United States would not be able to intervene in a crisis. It might also push wavering allies such as the Philippines to realign more tightly with China or demand that the US recognise its de facto territorial gains in the South China Sea.

America could also induce Russia or China to undertake below-the-threshold or grey-zone provocations.\textsuperscript{47} Pressure short of outright violence against American allies and partners in Southeast Asia, or the intensification of Russian activities in Ukraine, would not run much risk of war or even a serious diplomatic showdown with an overtaxed United States.\textsuperscript{48} But they would represent a form of coercive diplomacy by shifting facts on the ground and essentially daring an overcommitted superpower to respond. China arguably intensified its grey-zone activities in the South China Sea.
when the US Navy was temporarily sidelined by coronavirus, offering a preview of what may well come if the American military is consumed by another great-power conflict.49

Finally, US involvement in any war, but especially one with a great power, could create an opening for other states to enhance their military capabilities. Although a short, sharp war with Russia in Eastern Europe might not create as robust an opportunity for a Chinese build-up as the years of American involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, heavy losses in personnel and materiel might enlarge China’s scope for modernising its forces and shifting the balance of power in the Western Pacific and beyond.50 A regional power could also attempt to exploit American involvement in a serious conflict with a major power by rapidly making military improvements Washington would otherwise more forcefully resist. A poor US showing in a war with China, for example, might provide the breakout time Iran needs to become a threshold nuclear state, or for North Korea to conduct the additional missile and nuclear tests needed to refine its intercontinental attack capabilities.51

The potential permutations of opportunistic aggression are numerous, and not all scenarios are equally likely or consequential. Moreover, opportunistic aggression does not happen in a vacuum. Its occurrence would hinge heavily on factors independent of whether American forces were already engaged elsewhere.52 But there are several plausible scenarios in which a United States committed on one front might find itself menaced by an opportunistic adversary, with potentially severe consequences for American interests and security.

Averting opportunistic aggression
There are six possible strategies for averting opportunistic aggression, several of which overextended great-powers have adopted in the past. The first two – spending more and asymmetric escalation – offer military solutions. The second two – securing the flank and sharing burdens – aim to reduce the number of threats a great power confronts. The last two – holding the ring and driving a wedge – are intended to prevent hostile actors from banding together. All of these approaches, while offering some appeal, face stiff challenges today.
Consider the military solutions. Spending more involves improving the ability to respond to multiple crises. This was the approach the UK took by adopting the two-power naval standard in 1889, a policy meant to ensure that a war against France would not deplete British naval power to the point that the British Empire would be vulnerable to Russian aggression. After the Cold War, the United States spent enough to afford it a credible deterrent against two adversaries at once. The present-day equivalent of this strategy would be for the United States to return to a 1.5-war or two-war standard, so it could handle two significant conflicts simultaneously. Yet this solution would get very expensive very quickly. Britain’s two-power standard became harder to maintain in the face of Germany’s naval build-up.\textsuperscript{53} Even during the post-Cold War era, there were concerns about whether America’s two-war standard was realistic. The challenges to a ‘spend’ strategy are even greater today. Developing an authentic 1.5-war strategy would likely require sustained increases in military spending over the next five to ten years, at a time when defence budgets seem likely to decline, perhaps significantly. Building a force that can defeat challenges from China and Russia simultaneously would be harder still.\textsuperscript{54}

The other military strategy, asymmetric escalation, is also problematic. This approach involves compensating for conventional military vulnerability by threatening dramatic escalation. The United States could rely on its nuclear deterrent to hold aggressors at bay while it was engaged in a major conventional fight elsewhere. It could also threaten strategic cyber attacks against an opportunistic aggressor’s critical infrastructure or military capabilities. Options short of nuclear escalation, however, might not inflict enough pain to compel an aggressor to back down. A Russian leader who is willing to roll the dice in the Baltics might also tolerate enormous hardship to avoid defeat.\textsuperscript{55} The liabilities of nuclear escalation are equally severe: a threat to wage nuclear war over Taiwan or Latvia may not be credible, given that America would be risking a potentially cataclysmic nuclear exchange to avoid the loss of a relatively small amount of territory far from its borders.
Among approaches that prescribe reducing threats and burdens, securing the flank entails limiting the number of opponents by reaching agreements with potential adversaries. During the 1890s and early 1900s, an overstretched UK appeased the United States, allied with Japan and settled outstanding disputes with France and Russia to focus on Germany. In the 1970s, Israel dramatically lowered the possibility of another multi-front war by making peace with Egypt. Revisionist powers have also pursued this strategy: in 1939, Germany sealed the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact with the Soviet Union and secured Moscow’s benign neutrality, setting the stage for the invasion of Poland and later France.

Today, securing the flank might entail seeking a detente with Russia that allowed the United States to concentrate on China, or pursuing a rapprochement with North Korea or Iran to permit more intense focus on great-power competition. In either case, though, this strategy would probably sacrifice interests that once seemed important enough to defend. Decreasing tensions with Russia could require the United States to accept Moscow’s manipulation of Western political processes and its coercion of Eastern European neighbours. Setting aside differences with North Korea could mean allowing it to develop nuclear and missile forces unopposed. And easing tensions with Iran might entail acquiescing to its provocations across the Middle East. Not only would these efforts weaken US partnerships in the regions where they were implemented, but they could also have a cascading effect on Washington’s credibility across its alliance portfolio. Put differently, this strategy would suddenly treat commitments as independent after many decades of American officials insisting that they were interdependent.

Another option is sharing burdens: encouraging local actors to take more responsibility for their own and regional security so they can deter opportunism and help hold the line if deterrence fails. During the late nineteenth century, when the demands of imperial defence and the provision of public goods were scattering Britain’s forces across the globe, policymakers in London pushed the dominions to take more strategic responsibility. Following Vietnam, the United States shared burdens in an even more comprehensive way. The Nixon Doctrine declared that Asian allies and partners menaced by internal aggression must face those threats largely by
themselves. Simultaneously, a ‘regional sheriffs’ policy outsourced security commitments in key regions to friendly actors such as Israel and Iran.59

In the contemporary context, the United States could give its NATO allies more responsibility for deterring and checking Russian aggression.60 In the Asia-Pacific, the US could prod its security partners to bolster their capacity to resist an assault by China. And in the Middle East, Washington might exhort local states to take the lead in deterring expansionist behaviour by Iran. Although the United States would undoubtedly help its allies and partners with intelligence, arms sales and other enablers prior to or during a crisis, it would rely on its friends for geopolitical initiative and combat power. An increased reliance on other states, however, could erode US influence and create capability limitations and collective-action problems that increase the probability of deterrence failure. While Europe’s economic power dwarfs Russia’s, for instance, European states would still struggle to meet the Russian geopolitical threat without strong US leadership, which catalyses collective action and unifies states with vastly differing threat perceptions.61 Bereft of customarily strong US support, local states might simply accommodate revisionist powers. Emboldened revisionist powers themselves also might push harder.

Finally, there are the strategies for dividing or otherwise neutralising potential pairs of aggressors. Holding the ring entails making common cause with a potential opportunist’s enemy to reduce the prospect of intervention. The Anglo-Japanese alliance of the early twentieth century is a classic example. During the Russo-Japanese war, the alliance dissuaded France from coming into the conflict on behalf of its ally Russia for fear of triggering a war with the UK. Tokyo was thus able to fight and defeat a single enemy. Yet such a strategy has two principal liabilities. Firstly, finding new friends might create new enemies. The British worried that allying with Japan might lead to conflict with the United States; Washington was indeed displeased with the pact and insisted on its abrogation in the 1920s. Secondly, capable new allies are in short supply because the US alliance system is already so extensive, and most unaligned states are not powerful or close enough to affect Russian or Chinese calculations. One option would be to deepen the US relationship with India so that China might face a threat on
its western flank. But India appears reluctant to join a containment effort against China, and would perforce be unwilling to join the United States in a war against China.

Driving a wedge involves fracturing potential coalitions by setting two potential opponents against each other. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Napoleon’s success in conquering most of Europe reflected his ability to avoid multi-front wars by using threats and bribes to divide the coalitions confronting him. During the Cold War, the US employed a two-phase wedge strategy vis-à-vis the Sino-Soviet alliance: first exerting maximum pressure on Beijing to increase its dependence on Moscow and thereby straining the relationship, and then, after the Sino-Soviet split, building a relationship with China to confront the Kremlin with the prospect of a two-front war. The obvious target for a contemporary wedge strategy would again be the Russia–China partnership, in which there are frictions due to increasing asymmetries in strength and influence. The United States could try to play one off the other, but it could take years for the tensions between two rivals to disrupt an emerging coalition. US efforts to pressure China so that it demanded more resources from the Soviet Union eventually worked, but it took well over a decade and a series of nuclear crises. It is not clear, moreover, that Washington can overcome the shared threat perceptions and common ambitions driving Russia and China together anytime soon. Finally, when a wedge strategy involves concessions to a hostile power, it risks discomfiting the allies that the hostile power threatens.

* * *

The United States is in a quandary. The threat of opportunistic aggression is baked into Washington’s position as a global power confronting multiple threats. History reminds us that this phenomenon is no illusion, and that it can be quite dangerous. America’s present rivals have a variety of plausible options, from fighting dual wars to exploiting American vulnerabilities for coercive advantage. There is no easy solution or clearly dominant strategy for mitigating the challenge.
In theory, the US could reduce the danger by selectively employing a variety of the available options: modestly increasing military spending; de-escalating confrontations with regional powers without conceding key interests; delegating some responsibility to allies and partners; building better relations with India; and subtly working to increase the strains between Russia and China. Yet that would require a strategic clarity and focus that are utterly lacking in US leadership right now. Moreover, if post-COVID-19 reductions in defence spending are as severe as some analysts forecast, even a hybrid approach may not be possible. It also would run the risk that the United States might do just enough to convince itself that it is responding to the problem, without actually doing enough to solve it.

A necessary first step is simply to acknowledge the stark choice the United States faces. Spending significantly more on defence in the coming years, as a way of developing the capabilities and force structure needed to buy down the risk of opportunistic aggression, currently seems infeasible. Yet the alternative may be to pursue strategies that are far riskier than they first appear. Reasonable observers can debate which approach is preferable and how to weigh the respective costs and dangers. US officials, however, should not deceive themselves into thinking that the threat of opportunistic aggression is negligible or that there is a cheap, nifty way of eliminating it. That would delay the inevitable reckoning until the moment when the danger finally materialises – a course that would prove the most perilous of all.

Notes

4 This situation is often called


8 For a study that plays down the possibility of opportunistic aggression, see Michael Mazarr et al., What Deters and Why: Exploring Requirements for Effective Deterrence of Interstate Aggression (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018).

9 See Geoffrey Blainey, The Causes of War, 3rd ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1988). Opportunistic aggression is not the only scenario that could lead a country to face multiple challenges at once. A country could also face two or more unrelated conflicts, as happened when the United States intervened in the Dominican Republic while also escalating in South Vietnam.
in the spring of 1965.


20 The deployment of US naval forces to the Atlantic in support of the undeclared war against Germany also reduced American military strength in the Pacific, contributing to a window of opportunity for Japan. See Van Evera, *Causes of War*, pp. 89–90.


22 Conflict initiation and conflict intervention could also interact with one another. For instance, one aggressor might intervene in an ongoing conflict to impose costs on a defender, while another aggressor could jump through the window of opportunity created by that intervention to start a second war.


24 See Mark Grimsley, *The Franco-


32 Quoted in Brands, Making the Unipolar Moment, p. 360.


37 Russia finds it hard enough to compete with an America that is heavily distracted by China; its predicament would be far worse after the United States had defeated Beijing militarily, even in a limited war. See Michael Kofman, ‘Raiding and International Brigandry: Russia’s Strategy for Great Power Competition’, War


44 Both China and Russia have extensive cyber-warfare capabilities. See, for example, Jr Ng, ‘China Broadens Cyber Options’, Asian Military Review, 15 January 2020, https://asianmilitaryreview.com/2020/01/china-broadens-cyber-options/.


46 See, for example, Michael Green et al., Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practices of Gray Zone Deterrence (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017).

47 One way to reduce this particular risk would be to increase transparency through the use of airborne-surveillance assets. See Thomas G. Mahnken, Travis Sharp and Grace B. Kim, Deterrence by Detection: A Key Role for Unmanned Aircraft Systems in Great Power Competition (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2020).


49 See Shashank Bengali, ‘What the


See Mazarr et al., What Deters and Why.


See Stephanie Pezard et al., European Relations with Russia: Threat Perceptions, Responses, and Strategies in the Wake of the Ukrainian Crisis (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017).


See especially Timothy Crawford, ‘Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power


