Securing Strategic Buffer Space:
Case Studies and Implications for U.S. Global Strategy

By Sungtae "Jacky" Park

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The entire Eurasian landmass, stretching from Europe to East Asia, is in turmoil today. There is a hybrid conflict in Ukraine, an arc of war and instability from the Levant to the Persian Gulf, the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan, nuclear and missile provocations on the Korean Peninsula, and China's creeping encroachment in the South China Sea. What many of these conflicts, if not all, have in common is that they are taking place in a buffer zone, a physical space caught between competing regional powers. Indeed, war and conflict over these buffer zones has been a recurring theme throughout history. The spark of World War I was in Eastern Europe; Romans, Byzantines, Turks, and Persians fought numerous wars for control of Mesopotamia and the southern Caucasus; Americans, Chinese, Japanese, and Russians fought their own wars over Korea.

Buffer states or regions serve as flashpoints for military conflicts. As historian Robert Kagan puts it, "great power wars often begin as arguments over buffer states where spheres of influence intersect."[1] Often, conflicts within buffer zones spill over, become wider conflicts, and sometimes escalate to become general wars, as vested regional powers intervene to influence the situation in their favor. Therefore, a study of how great powers resolved their competitions over strategic buffer space or why they were unable to do in other cases is in order, particularly in relations to current buffer space conflicts. Such a study could help U.S. policymakers come up with better strategies to bring greater stability around the globe and prevent these conflicts from spilling over to affect U.S. interests and security.

Toward that end, this report examines four major cases of strategic buffer space conflicts. The report will first examine the Belgian crisis of 1830-1831, which was a rare instance in which

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[1] Robert Kagan, "The United States Must Resist a Return to Spheres of Interest in the International System," *Order from Chaos: Foreign Policy in a Troubled World*, The Brookings Institution, February 19, 2015, http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/order-from-chaos/posts/2015/02/19-united-states-must-resist-return-to-spheres-of-interest-international-system-kagan.

a conflict over a critical buffer region did not turn into a major war and was settled through diplomacy. Belgium was also able to remain neutral for more than seventy-five years from 1839 until World War I—an astounding achievement by any historical standard. The report will then examine three cases (the Middle East between the Byzantine and Sassanid empires and Ottoman and Safavid empires, late nineteenth and early twentieth century Korea between China, Japan, and Russia, and the Balkans between Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Russia) in which great powers failed to find a political solution over strategic buffer zones. The latter three cases were chosen to reflect the different regional varieties of conflicts over strategic buffer spaces. For the purpose of this study, this report does not delve into disputes over maritime domains, as territorial waters can be claimed, but not occupied.

An examination of the four case studies reveals that dynamics of these conflicts depend on four principal factors: balance of power among great powers, relative stability of the contested buffer space, existence/nonexistence of a credible third-party guarantor of security, and prevailing ideologies. The relative imbalance of power among great powers competing over strategic buffer space often leads to a conflictual outcome, as the stronger side refuses to compromise, while the weaker side makes preventive attempts to claim the buffer region in dispute. Great powers also fail to manage and settle buffer space conflicts when competing parties are dealing with unstable buffers that contain multiple autonomous local actors. The existence of a relatively impartial third-party actor that has the capacity to guarantee security and stability of a contested buffer space helps to mitigate security dilemmas among competing great powers. Great powers are also inclined toward diplomatic solutions when there exists an agreed international norm that emphasizes moderation and equilibrium. As a maritime power dealing with a series of buffer space conflicts across Eurasia, the United States could benefit immensely

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by taking these dynamics into consideration and by formulating a nuanced global strategy based on relevant lessons learned.

What Is a Strategic Buffer Space?

A strategic buffer space (or, alternatively, strategic buffer zone) is a particular type of a buffer space. Scholars define a buffer state or space as a relatively weak state, space, or region that could serve as "a shock absorber," "padding," or a "distancing unit," for another more powerful state adjacent to it.[2] American geostrategist Nicholas J. Spykman defined buffers as "small political units located between large nations."[3]

Trygve Mathisen argues that a buffer entity has to meet three conditions. First, it has to be between two or more states in terms of geography. Second, a buffer entity has to be relatively weaker than neighboring major powers in terms of capacity. Third, a buffer entity has to be independent to some degree while adjacent major powers adjacent have to be competitors or adversaries.[4]

Mary Barnes Gear separates buffer entities into those that are "natural buffers" and those that are not. Natural buffers have "barrier type terrain, poor transportation, and indifference to, and by, the rest of the world," although she notes the possibility that technology and outside influences might alter the particular attributes of natural buffers.[5] Great powers usually do not compete as fiercely over a natural buffer as they do over other types of buffers because natural

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[2] Alan K. Henrikson, "Distance and Foreign Policy: A Political Geography Approach," *International Political Science Review* 23.4 (October 2002): p. 454.

[3] Nicholas J. Spykman, "Frontiers, Security, and International Organization," *Geographical Review* 32.3 (July 1942): p. 440.

[4] Noted in Michael G. Partem, "The Buffer System in International Relations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 27.1 (March 1983): p. 4. Other definitions of a buffer state are well explored in Tornike Turmaniże, *Buffer States: Power Policies, Foreign Policies and Concepts* (New York: Nova Science, 2009), p. 1-11.

[5] Mary Barnes Gear, "Role of Buffer States in International Relations," *Journal of Geography* 40.3 (January 1941): p. 88.

buffers are difficult to occupy, control, or transit through. For example, the Himalaya mountains or the dense jungles of Indochina have historically served as natural buffers between China and India. Thus, Chinese and Indian empires have historically had limited interactions with each other throughout history. Modern technology has yet to provide solutions for occupying armies to overcome these natural barriers.

A buffer zone that is not a natural barrier is what can be labeled a "strategic buffer space." Unlike barrier zones, a strategic buffer space is easily accessible by land or waterways. These buffer zones remain independent, not because of their geographic toughness, but because surrounding great powers compete to prevent each other from annexing such buffers.[6] Examples include Central and Eastern Europe, which has historically been contested between Germans, Austrians, Russians, and the Ottomans, and the Low Countries (Belgium and Netherlands), which have been critical buffers between Britain and continental Europe. In the Middle East, great powers occupying the Anatolian peninsula and the Iranian plateau have historically competed to control southern Caucasus and Mesopotamia, which is now mostly Iraq and Syria. In East Asia, the Korean peninsula has always been the battleground whenever Japan emerged to challenge China for hegemony in the region. Many of these conflict zones are back in the spotlight again and will likely continue to return as regional flashpoints if history serves as a good indicator.

The Importance of Strategic Buffer Space

The main security benefit that a strategic buffer space accords is distance. Despite advances in modern military technology, logistics remains a critical (and underappreciated) part

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[6] Tornike Turmaniże, *Buffer States: Power Policies, Foreign Policies and Concepts* (New York: Nova Science, 2009), p. 14.

of international relations. As a military saying goes, "[a]mateurs study strategy. Professionals

study logistics."[7] Simply put, instant transportation has yet to become a reality. Intercontinental

missiles could allow a state to hit another state half a world away within half an hour, but

missiles cannot occupy territory, and strategic bombing alone never wins wars; only occupying

armies can.[8] Even under the best circumstances, moving a large army or a fleet over a distance

takes time, technology, experience, and treasure. Taking into account weather, extension of

supply lines, and an adversary bent on thwarting preexisting plans, the art of projecting power

becomes a herculean task, even for the highly experienced expeditionary forces of the United

States. The U.S. military excels in power projection due to a rare combination of having

advanced technology, decades of experience, massive defense budget, and allies and bases all

over the world. Most states (even the United States at times), however, must overcome serious

logistical hurdles to project power to pose threats to other states.

Having a strategic buffer means that an invading army has to march for a longer period

before reaching a great power's core territory, providing it with more "time to prepare, time to

decide, [and] time to execute."[9] A strategic buffer also further stretches an adversary's supply

line, making it more vulnerable and forcing the adversary to put more efforts into sustaining the

line. Therefore, having additional swaths of strategic buffer zones around one's core territory

yields immense security benefits for defending states. Moreover, as Alan K. Henrikson notes,

states without an adequate buffer "may feel a need for other, quicker means of defending

itself."[10] This means that major powers lacking in buffers have less tolerance for risk and are

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[7] Quoted in Jim Garamone, "Military Logistics Strained, But Healthy, Official Says," *DoD News*, January 10, 2012, http://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=66743.
[8] See Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1996).
[9] Henrikson, "Distance and Foreign Policy: A Political Geography Approach," p. 455; Spykman, "Frontiers, Security, and International Organization," p. 440.
[10] Henrikson, "Distance and Foreign Policy: A Political Geography Approach," p. 455.

more likely to opt for risky preemptive or preventive wars. Hence, great powers often seek to ensure that they have influence over buffer zones, lest they fall under an adversary's influence or control and become security threats by becoming staging areas for invasions. Hence, existence of stable buffer zones helps to maintain a regional system's stability, while instability in buffer zones or failure to agree on their status among great powers fosters conflict.

Four Factors That Explain Strategic Buffer Space Conflicts

While great powers could attempt to find a peaceful solution over strategic buffer zones and often do try, they frequently fail because of four reasons.

First, the relative imbalance of power among competing great powers often makes it difficult to produce a diplomatic outcome, as the stronger side refuses to compromise, while the weaker side makes preventive attempts to claim the buffer region in dispute. Partitions, too, often fail as solutions because one side always tends to see partition as a relatively disadvantageous outcome from a balance of power perspective. Given these issues and inherent value of buffer zones, states in stronger positions are prone to taking tough negotiating positions and are usually reluctant to make genuine compromises with weaker states. Therefore, states in relatively weaker positions have strong incentives to make the first (often risky) move to claim buffer regions before stronger parties do so first since stronger parties claiming strategic buffer regions would shift the balance of power against weaker states even further.

Second, great powers often have little control over what actually occurs within a strategic buffer zone, particularly if the buffer being contested is unstable or is fractured internally. These are often what Saul Bernard Cohen calls "shatterbelts," which are "strategically oriented regions

that are both deeply divided internally and caught up in the competition between great powers."[11] In this context, events out of great powers' control might inadvertently move a strategic buffer zone toward one camp or another. Such dynamics on the ground often lead great powers to give up on a compromise outcome and opt for an all-or-nothing solution by taking the side of one particular group or state in a buffer region.

Third, the absence of a credible third-party guarantor of neutrality for buffer regions makes it difficult for competing great powers to settle their dispute. Michael G. Partem suggests that one way to stabilize a conflict over a strategic buffer space is to bring in a state, whose primary interest is maintenance of the balance of power in a region. Maintaining a neutral status for a buffer region or state without the involvement of an external guarantor is difficult because there is no such thing as "neutral neutrality"; a neutral status for a buffer state is usually more advantageous to one great power than to the other. Moreover, if a strategic buffer area were to be neutral, how will it maintain the status? How can a great power trust that other great powers will not attempt to draw a strategic buffer entity with significant strategic value into their orbits, particularly in times of shifts in the balance of power? A credible third-party guarantor could underwrite a buffer zone's stability and security and would need to be a geographically distant power historically not involved in the relevant region's conflict. A third-party guarantor also cannot take the side of one great power or the other or be perceived to be doing so.[12]

Last but not least, the existence of an order based on principles of equilibrium and moderation could help with conflict resolution over buffer space conflicts. Historically, there has been only one major example in history during which great powers consciously practiced

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[11] Saul Bernard Cohen, *Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), p. 48.
[12] Partem, "The Buffer System in International Relations," p. 4.

diplomacy based on principles of equilibrium and moderation: the Concert of Europe, which lasted from 1815 until 1848.[13] During the period, European powers affirmed the existing boundaries and carefully crafted balance of power, vowed to maintain stability and status-quo, and guarded against revolutionary, maximalist ideologies and impulses that could throw the continent into chaos. Largely, this system was premised on the fact that European governments at the time saw instability, populism, and possibilities of revolution as threatening to their survival. Instead, European leaders during the period focused, not on maximizing power or imposing ideologies, but on stability based on moderation and balance. This shared norm played a role in containing crises such as the Belgian crisis of 1830-1831. In most periods of history, however, shared norms based on equilibrium and moderation have been rare.

The subsequent sections of this report demonstrate how the four factors affected the outcomes of the selected case studies on strategic buffer space conflicts. The Belgian crisis of 1830-1831, which did not result in a continental war, was settled in an environment in which there was a relatively stable and equal balance of power in Europe, relative stability in the United Kingdom of Netherlands, a credible third-party guarantor of security in the form of Britain, and commitment to the norm of moderation and equilibrium. In the other three cases of the Middle East, Korea, and Eastern Europe, the balance of power either was in favor of one side or was shifting in favor of one side, buffer regions in contestation were unstable, no credible third-party guarantor existed, and maximalist, winner-take-all ideologies were prevalent.

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[13] Contrary to the common assumption, the Concert of Europe did not last throughout the entire nineteenth century. The 1848 revolutions reshaped how European leaders saw their relationship with the masses, and the Crimean war of 1853-1856 effectively marked the end of the concert.

The Belgian Crisis 1830-1831: The European Concert Plays On

Belgium is a small, easily traversable state strategically located on the northwestern coast of the continental Europe and lies between Britain, France, and Germany. For the French and the Germans, Belgium was a buffer, not only against each other, but also against Britain, which would be able to use Belgium as a beachhead for invading the continental Europe. Conversely, any continental power in control of Belgium would have a launching pad for invading the British isles. As Napoleon once put it, Belgium's port city Antwerp is "a pistol pointed at the heart of Britain."[14] Despite the small country's immense strategic value, European powers were able to find a political solution to the Belgian crisis of 1830-1831 and maintain the country as a neutral buffer throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. A confluence of factors that included the carefully constructed balance of power in Europe, the bifurcated nature of the Belgian secession, the British role as an offshore balancer, and a common norm predicated on principles of equilibrium and moderation all served to bring about a diplomatic resolution to this conflict.

Background

After the defeat of Napoleon, the United Kingdom of Netherlands, which included both Belgium and Netherlands, was created in 1815 as a bulwark against future French expansion northward. Yet, northerners and southerners within the kingdom had a wide variety of differences, including differences over religion, economic policy, and distribution of political power. During the summer of 1830, the southerners revolted, creating a crisis that threatened to

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[14] Quoted in Kenneth Turan, "Belgium's Charming Port of Call," *Moscow Times*, March 5, 1997, http://www.themoscowtimes.com/sitemap/free/1997/3/article/belgiums-charming-port-of-call/310744.html.

plunge Europe into another war, as different outside powers considered the impact of the revolution on the continental balance of power.

The French, who saw the Dutch kingdom as a barrier to contain France, saw the rebellion as an opportunity. The French initially suggested partitioning Belgium among France, Netherlands, and Prussia.[15] Then, the French ambassador to Britain, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgold, sought to detach French-speaking Wallonia, which the French eventually hoped to annex. As he quipped, "[t]here are no Belgians, there never have been, and there never will be: there are Frenchmen, Flemings or Dutchmen (which is the same thing) and Germans."[16] Other European powers, having defeated Napoleon less than a generation ago, sought to keep the Netherlands united to prevent French expansion, although the British held a more ambiguous attitude toward the conflict. The Austrians, Prussians, and Russians also did not want to see a popular revolution spread across Europe. In the end, the European powers were able to resolve this issue peacefully during the 1830-1831 London conference, de-facto recognizing an independent Belgium. In 1839, Great Britain, Austria, France, the German confederation, Russia, and the Netherlands formally recognized and agreed on Belgium's independence and neutrality and Luxembourg's independence with the Treaty of London.

Belgian neutrality lasted until 1914—an astounding achievement. To be sure, Belgian neutrality did not prevent the Franco-Prussian war, fought between 1870 and 1871, but the buffer role of the two states ensured that any continental conflict in Europe did not involve Great Britain, the leading European and maritime power during the nineteenth century, and managed to keep the war local.

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[15] Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics: 1763-1848* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), p. 677.
[16] Quoted in Samuel Humes, *Belgium: Long United, Long Divided* (London: Hurst, 2014), p. 131.

Balance of Power

A carefully constructed balance of power existed in Europe from 1815 to 1871 to deter any of the major powers from taking advantage of the Belgian crisis for strategic gains. The balance of power constructed during the Congress of Vienna ensured that France would be contained but also that German states would not be powerful enough to dominate the entire continent. During the 1830-1831 crisis, France and other European powers seemed as if they were headed toward another continental war. The British, however, warned that France unilaterally choosing the ruler of Belgium or moving into the Low Countries could mean war.[17] Faced with this threat and understanding that France could not prevail against a European coalition, the French opted for a diplomatic solution. European powers at this time also understood that war would be detrimental for all parties and could have devastating consequences, including for the French, particularly because a relatively even balance of power existed based on the arrangement created by the Congress of Vienna. This equilibrium lasted until Germany unified and eventually rose to challenge the system.

Relative Stability of the Buffer Space

Given the nature of the secessionist conflict, the Low Countries during this period could certainly be considered a shatterbelt that could have drawn in great powers to intervene militarily. The northerners and southerners had many fault lines, including political, religious, and linguistic differences. Nevertheless, the Low Countries were not thrown into complete chaos during the Belgian crisis, as the Dutch kingdom was essentially bifurcated into northern and southern portions, instead of completely shattering into pieces. There was also a clear Belgian

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[17] Barry H. Steiner, *Collective Preventive Diplomacy: A Study of International Conflict Management* (Albany: State U of New York, 2004), p. 113.

provisional government, and then a Belgian national congress came about. This meant that there were only two main independent political entities in control of their territories and resources in this buffer conflict. Outside great powers had clear negotiating partners on the ground and could more easily find and enforce a diplomatic settlement without events on the ground completely spiraling out of state authorities' control.

Credible Third-Party Guarantor of Neutrality

From 1839 and beyond, one of the most important factors that kept Europe's great powers from violating Belgian neutrality and causing a continent-wide conflict was Great Britain's staunch security guarantee over the two countries. As an island power, Britain played the role of an offshore balancer. Prior to the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871, there was a real possibility that either the French or the Prussians were going to invade Belgium to gain an upper hand against one another. Both sides, however, backed down in response to British threats to intervene. Throughout the nineteenth century, Britain's guarantee of Belgian and Dutch neutrality continued to be a deterrent against both the French and the Germans.

The strategic environment, however, began to shift during the early twentieth century. With Germany's rapid rise, the future of British guarantee of Belgium's neutrality became increasingly uncertain. As per the Schlieffen plan, the Germans then proceeded to invade Belgium in 1914 in an attempt to knock France out of the war before dealing with Russia.

Ideology Dimension

The first half of the nineteenth century was the golden age for the concept of equilibrium and moderation in the European balance of power. The outcomes of the Congress of Vienna

were very much influenced by the idea that an equilibrium based on moderation was key to peace and stability. The most interesting aspect with regard to how Europe's great powers resolved the Belgian crisis of 1830-1831 was that they were willing to restrain and coerce the sides they supported instead of seeking to maximize gains in relative power.

During the crisis, the French and other European powers demanded that the Belgians and Dutch stop their fighting and decided that they would intervene militarily against any power that refused to comply.[18] In May 1831, the European powers also threatened to break off relations with Belgium, unless it accepted the settlement drawn up by the major powers by June.[19] Then, when the French intervened militarily without any warning in August 1831 in response to a Dutch attack in violation of the armistice against Belgium, other European powers, despite supporting Netherlands at the beginning of the crisis, essentially let the events progress and allowed the French to punish the Dutch. Had Austria, Prussia, and Russia given blank checks to the Dutch and intervened, the conflict would probably have turned into another Europe-wide war. Instead, the European powers, despite their concerns about French expansionism, recognized Netherlands' aggression and allowed the French to intervene with the condition that they should go far just enough to restore the status quo-ante.[20]

Not only did other European powers not aid Netherlands, the British actually sent a squadron of ships to aid the Belgians against the Dutch and later deployed the British navy off the coast of the Netherlands to warn the Dutch king to prevent him from further escalating the crisis.[21] The London conference, led by the British and the French, then imposed peace in the

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[18] Matthew Rendall, "A Qualified Success for Collective Security: The Concert of Europe and the Belgian Crisis, 1831," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 18.2 (June 2007): p. 277-278.
[19] Steiner, *Collective Preventive Diplomacy: A Study of International Conflict Management*, p. 145.
[20] Rendall, "A Qualified Success for Collective Security: The Concert of Europe and the Belgian Crisis, 1831," p. 282.
[21] Rendall, "A Qualified Success for Collective Security: The Concert of Europe and the Belgian Crisis, 1831," p. 283-284.

Low Countries, de-facto recognizing Belgium. When the Dutch king refused to accept Belgium's independence, the French used force to push Dutch forces out of Belgium, while the British blockaded the Netherlands' ports.[22] The Russians condemned this move and withdrew from the conference, although they did not take any action in response; they were too far to be able to influence the events in northwestern Europe. As a result, a stable settlement emerged in the Low Countries.

The success of the European powers in bringing about this outcome was extraordinarily, given that the British and the French had been mortal enemies less than a generation prior to the Belgian revolution. Settling the crisis diplomatically required two elements. First, a moderate solution was proposed and accepted by most parties, notably by the British and the French. The British accepted that Belgium would be independent, but the French also accepted that the seceding territory would not consist of merely French-speaking people. Hence, the solution saw that the French felt more secure on its norther border, but that they would not be able to expand by annexing more territories. Second, the British were willing to restrain and coerce the Dutch.

Major European powers during the first half of the nineteenth century also adhered to conservative norms, even as this was an era during which popular nationalism was simmering across Europe. One of the reasons why Louis-Phillipe, the French king, opted for a relatively moderate solution over the Belgian crisis was because he still wanted to cooperate with other monarchs to preserve the conservative order and to control France's own revolutionary impulses at home. While the French public supported going to war over Belgium, he feared that doing so would unleash another revolution.[23] In Prussia, the opposite was true in that the public was

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[22] Rendall, "A Qualified Success for Collective Security: The Concert of Europe and the Belgian Crisis, 1831," p. 285.
[23] Rendall, "Defensive Realism and the Concert of Europe," p. 539.

averse to fighting another war with France, effectively dampening Frederick William III's already low desire for war. Frederick William strongly believed in integrating France into the European order, writing that France should be "in solidarity with the other powers to uphold the status quo in Europe." [24]

Hence, the ideology dimension played a major role in bringing about a diplomatic solution to the Belgian crisis. All governments at the time wanted to maintain the conservative order in some form and were committed to the principle of moderation and equilibrium. Even the revisionist France was "socialized" into this world order. Historian Paul W. Schroeder writes that Louise-Phillipe's regime in France was possibly the most status-quo-oriented regime perhaps in the entire French history. As argued by Schroeder, however, the eventual loss of "the ability of the great powers to dominate and manipulate the smaller powers and repress popular movements and revolutions" after 1848 became evident. [25] This would have particularly grave consequences in the Balkans, where nationalistic sentiments would eventually emerge as one cause of World War I.

East-West Wars over the Middle East: A Clash of Might and Religion

What are today's southern Caucasus, Syria, and Iraq have been constantly fought over throughout history by a great power based in Istanbul and another based in the Iranian mountains. Whoever controls Mesopotamia and southern Caucasus is able to project power into every other part of the Middle East. Hence, the Romans, Byzantines, the Ottomans, and the Persians constantly fought for control of the region. Geographically, the Byzantines and the Ottomans roughly occupied what is today's Turkey, and the Sassanids and the Safavids were

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[24] Quoted in Rendall, "Defensive Realism and the Concert of Europe," p. 537.
[25] Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics: 1763-1848*, p. 673, 677.

Iranian empires. Examination of the Byzantine-Sassanid conflict between 571 and 628 CE and the Ottoman-Safavid conflict between 1514 and 1639 CE reveal the factors that caused and perpetuated these conflicts and prevented stable solutions. The imbalance of power in favor of an Anatolian power, the complex nature of the Middle Eastern shatterbelt, nonexistence of a third-party guarantor, and the religious nature of these conflicts all played a role in shaping these dynamics.

The Byzantine-Sassanid Wars

The Byzantine-Sassanid wars can be traced back to Roman and Parthian times, with some of the earliest clashes between the Roman republic and the Parthian empire going back to the first century BCE. As the frontier zones between the two empires, the southern Caucasus and northern Mesopotamia became conflict zones with Roman/Byzantine and Persian borders constantly shifting with intermittent conflicts and periods of peace. Some of the conflicts began simply out of desire by one side to change the status-quo as opportunities rose, and some began because local forces on the ground antagonistic toward one empire sought support from the other.

While there were numerous small to medium-scale wars, the two major periods of conflict between the Byzantines and Sassanids lasted from 572 to 591 CE and from 602 and 628 CE. The conflict that began in 572 started when the Byzantines decided to support an Armenian revolt against the Sassanids. This conflict was accompanied by other proxy conflicts in the region, for example, with the Sassanids helping to overthrow a Byzantine client state in Yemen and establishing one's own and with both empires' clients clashing in the eastern Mediterranean region. On balance, this conflict ended with the Byzantine empire's victory, with the western

half of Sassanid Armenia and Iberia (in the Caucasus) falling under the Byzantine sphere of influence. The second major period of conflict from 602 to 628 CE was a continuation of the wars between 572 and 591 CE in that the Sassanids began the war in an effort to recover the territory lost to the Byzantines during the previous war. This conflict, while it initially went in favor of the Persians, also eventually ended in a Byzantine victory, although in a territorial status-quo.

The Ottoman-Safavid Wars

Although different in terms of ethnic and religious composition, the Ottomans and the Safavids were anchored in the lands that the Byzantine and Sassanid empires respectively held and competed for the southern Caucasus and Mesopotamia. Dynamics on the ground were also similar in that conflicts and shifting loyalties and interests among local leaders often became catalysts that drew in both empires to intervene.

Between the early sixteenth century and mid-seventeenth century, the Ottomans and the Safavids fought five conflicts, and the Ottomans won four of them, including the last war, which ended in a relatively stable accord. The Treaty of Zuhab, signed in 1639, affirmed that Mesopotamia would be part of the Ottoman Empire, while the southern Caucasus would be partitioned, with the western portion going to the Ottomans and the eastern portion going to the Safavids. The treaty ended the last official war fought between the Ottomans and the Persians.

The two empires, however, continued to contest each other's borders throughout the subsequent centuries due to Persian attempts to reconquer their lost territory. During the eighteenth century, the Safavid Empire's Nader Shah and its successor, Zand dynasty, made

three failed attempts to take Mesopotamia from the Ottomans. During the nineteenth century, the Qajar dynasty also attempted but failed to do the same.

Balance of Power

The conflicts over the southern Caucasus and Mesopotamia between the Byzantine, Sassanid, Ottoman, and Safavid empires largely took place in the context of regional bipolarity. The Byzantines and Sassanids were the "two superpowers of western Eurasia" during their times, and the Ottomans and the Safavids were the two dominant powers in the Middle East during their rivalry.[26] Although each of the four empires had to contend from other threats as well, there was no third great power during their bipolar dominance in the region. Based on the outcomes of the mentioned wars, however, one could argue that those that were based in Istanbul were always more powerful than the ones based on the Iranian plateau. The Byzantines won both of their major wars during the sixth and century centuries, and the Ottomans won four out of five wars against the Safavids.

Mesopotamia and the southern Caucasus were important to these empires for security and economic reasons. First, they were important buffer zones. Second, they were economically important as trade routes that connected Europe to Asia. The empire that could control the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf also controlled the maritime routes that led from the Middle East to the Indian Ocean.[27] Controlling Mesopotamia meant control of immense wealth and augmentation of relative capacity and prestige.

For both sets of empires, settlements and stabilization of their wars came about after prolonged periods due to two factors: Overall military superiority of the Anatolian power and

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[26] John Robertson, *Iraq: A History* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2015), p. 151.
[27] André Clot, *Suleiman the Magnificent* (New York: New Amsterdam, 1992), p. 90.

defensive geography of the Iranian plateau. These wars continued because the Byzantines and the Ottomans were powerful enough to do so. Because the Sassanids and the Safavids were the weaker rivals, a stable balance of power did not exist, as Anatolian forces could constantly push eastward. At the same time, the Byzantines and the Ottomans, while they could advance deep into what is now northern and central Iraq, could not advance deep into the Iranian plateaus because of their imposing geography. Moreover, advances from the west were often overstretched by time they reached the Iranian mountains.[28]

Relative Stability of the Buffer Space

An additional factor that made it difficult to avoid wars was that Mesopotamia and the southern Caucasus were textbook examples of a shatterbelt. The borderlands between the empires were occupied by a myriad of local actors who had their own interests and constantly switched loyalties based on circumstances. These local level conflicts inevitably drew in the great powers, as one local entity or the other was a client of each of the great powers. Notably, the area that is administered today by the Kurdish Regional Government was hotly contested by the Ottomans and the Safavids, as Kurdish and other tribes continuously resisted outside control. The independent nature of these groups added an additional level of difficult to settling the Ottoman-Safavid conflict, as different groups on the ground often rebelled against occupying forces.[29]

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[28] Clot, *Suleiman the Magnificent*, p. 94.
[29] Robertson, *Iraq: A History*, p. 233-234.

Ideology Dimension

The ideological factor in both Byzantine-Sassanid and Ottoman-Safavid conflicts that made the wars far more dangerous and intractable was the issue of religion. All of the involved parties based their legitimacy on the fact that they were champions of their respective religions. The Byzantines saw themselves as defenders of Orthodox Christianity, while the Sassanids were champions of Zoroastrianism; the Ottomans saw themselves as defenders of Sunni Islam, while the Safavids saw themselves as champions of Shia Islam. The issue of religion was an important factor that generated instability both in terms of how these opposing empires saw each other and in terms of how religious differences created conflicts in borderlands.

Because of religious differences, the Byzantines and Sassanids saw an existential enemy in each other. Moreover, war for them was holy. For example, the Byzantines went to a great length to retrieve the "True Cross" of Jesus, the remnants of the cross on which Jesus was reportedly crucified, which the Sassanids reportedly took when they captured Jerusalem. The Byzantines and the Sassanids also both persecuted Zoroastrians and Christians whenever territory changed hands. Furthermore, the religion dimension made the borderlands unstable because the Byzantines sought to exert influence in their client states through powerful bishops, while the Sassanids attempted to exert their influence in their client states through Zoroastrian priests.[30] Given that these borderlands contained numerous different ethnic groups and religions, reliance on singular religious authorities often became seeds of internal conflicts that drew in the great powers.

The Ottoman-Safavid conflict also took on a religious tone. The issue of religion seemed to have become an issue when the first shah of the Safavids, Ismail I, began to persecute Sunnis

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[30] Robertson, *Iraq: A History*, p. 151.

and desecrate their mosques and graves as he expanded his realm. Initially, the Ottomans extended a friendly hand, congratulating Ismail on his conquests, while requesting that he stop his persecution of Sunnis. Ismail and his successors, however, continued religious persecutions and promoted Shia disturbances in Ottoman territories.[31] In this sense, the Safavid empire was the revisionist force of the time. The Ottomans represented the dominant Islamic power seeking to maintain the status-quo, but the Safavids were seeking to overturn the Islamic order dominated by Sunnis to create one dominated by Shias. This led to concerns within the Ottoman empire that the Safavids would use Shias within Ottoman provinces to subvert the Sunni empire, leading to persecution of Shias within the Ottoman empire. Eventually, the Ottomans concluded that they had to go to war with the Safavids before they became more serious threats.[32]

As the Ottoman-Safavid wars escalated, religious persecutions on both sides also increased. Whenever each side conquered new territories, the conquered were forced to convert to either Sunni or Shia Islam or face persecution. Ottoman control of Mesopotamia became a major issue because Shia holy cities of Najaf and Karbala fell under Ottoman rule, and the Safavids constantly sought to claim them. For the Ottomans, capturing Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid caliphate (which was supposed to have presided over the golden age of Islam), was an important goal for legitimizing Ottoman sultans as Islamic caliphs and was achieved in 1534. After conquering Baghdad and pacifying Mesopotamia, the Ottomans proclaimed a policy of "Islamic universalism" and embraced both Sunnis and Shias to some extent.[33]

The religious dimension of the Ottoman-Safavid conflict began to subside as both sides began to tire of constant wars and began to seek a stable settlement, particularly on issues such as

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[31] Clot, *Suleiman the Magnificent*, p. 90.
[32] Steven R. Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown UP, 2009), p. 44.
[33] Clot, *Suleiman the Magnificent*, p. 92-93.

protection of religious rights and pilgrimage. In territorial terms, the Ottomans had clearly won

in Mesopotamia. To keep peace, however, both sides had to come to terms to some degree, if not

completely, with each other on the issue of religion. To this end, the 1639 Treaty of Zuhab,

signed between the two empires, not only affirmed the status quo of the Ottoman and Safavid

borders but also calmed the religious struggle between the two sides. Historian Ernest Tucker

argues that the treaty was the Middle Eastern equivalent of the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, which

ended the thirty years religious war in Europe.[34]

The Great Game over Korea: Whales Fighting over a Shrimp

      The Korean peninsula is a small piece of land that juts out of the northern portion of

mainland Asia. To Korea's east is the island country of Japan. To the north is Russia, and China

is situated to the north and west of Korea. A continental power can use Korea as a launching pad

to invade Japan, hence the term, "a dagger pointed at the heart of Japan."[35] Conversely, a

maritime power can use Korea as a beachhead to invade mainland Asia. A Chinese general noted

in the late sixteenth century that "Liaodong [a southern coastal part of Manchuria] is an arm to

Beijing whereas Chosun [a Korean kingdom] is a fence to Liaodong."[36] Due to its geographic

centrality in Northeast Asia, the Korean peninsula has historically been the pivot of contention

whenever great power competitions emerged in the region. An old proverb describing Korea's

geography says that "a shrimp breaks its back in a fight between whales."

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[34] Ernest Tucker, "From Rhetoric of War to Realities of Peace: The Evolution of Ottoman-Iranian Diplomacy through the Safavid Eram" in *Iran and the World in the Safavid Age*, ed. Willem M. Floor and Edmund Herzig (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), p. 84-87.

[35] Quoted in James L. McClain, *Japan: A Modern History* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2002), p. 296.

[36] Quoted in Jae-ho Chung, *Between Ally and Partner: Korea-China Relations and the United States* (New York: Columbia UP, 2007), p. 14.

Indeed, Chinese and Japanese have been involved themselves politically and militarily in Korea since antiquity; the Mongol invasion of Japan, the only invasion of Japan's home islands before World War II, came through Korea in 1274 and 1281; the second major conflict between China and Japan was fought in Korea between 1592 and 1598. During the modern era, three major wars, the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), and the Korean War (1950–1953), broke out over the status of Korea.

This section of the report examines great power rivalries over Korea during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During the pre-modern era, Korea, particularly during the Joseon period (1392–1897), was part of China's historic sphere of influence in Asia. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, Korea became the center of great power rivalry. China, the historic hegemon in Asia, was in decline, while Japan was rising in the east, Russia was encroaching from the north, and other European powers and the United States were seeking to open the region to trade. The resident powers in Northeast Asia, China, Japan, and Russia, were concerned that the Korean peninsula could be used by one another as a platform for posing security threats.

Although the three countries sought to resolve the Korean question diplomatically, they ultimately failed, as the balance of power in Northeast Asia was shifting, as Korea was unstable, and as the United States refused to guarantee Korean security. By the end of the 1800s, a three-way struggle over Korea ensued, resulting in two major wars, the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-1895 and the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905, which marked the beginning of a conflict to decide which country was to become the new leader in Asia. In both conflicts, the Japanese prevailed and eventually annexed Korea in 1910.

Balance of Power

The perceived imbalance of power in Northeast Asia in favor of Russia was an important trigger of both the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars. In 1894-1895, the Japanese were driven to push China out of Korea due to the concern that the Chinese were too weak to resist Russia's southern advances, particularly with Russia's construction of the trans-Siberian railroad, which began to be built in 1891.[37] In the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese war, the Russians also leased Port Arthur and Dalian in China's northeastern Liaoning province and began efforts to link the warm water port to the trans-Siberian railroad.[38] The Japanese feared that, if the Russians were to achieve their objective, they would be able to focus a greater number of troops and supplies in Northeast Asia and would pose a significant threat to Japan. Hence, Korea, which was located beneath Liaoning and Manchuria, became an issue of contention between Japan and Russia.

Japan and Russia considered three approaches to resolving the Korean question: partition, neutralization with an international guarantee, and handing Manchuria to Russia and Korea to Japan. There was an attempt by Japan to accord a neutral status to Korea in the aftermath of a military revolt in Korea in 1882, but the Korean court rejected the offer out of an optimistic projection about the future.[39] Russia and Korea, during the late 1890s and early 1900s, returned to the idea of institutionalizing Korea's neutrality, but many Japanese did not trust that the Russians would keep such an agreement. These Japanese officials believed that a neutral Korea had to be paired with a neutral Manchuria, which the Japanese feared could be used by the

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[37] Seung-Young Kim, "Russo–Japanese Rivalry over Korean Buffer at the Beginning of the 20th Century and Its Implications," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 16.4 (2005): p. 621.

[38] Michael J. Seth, *A History of Korea: From Antiquity to the Present* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), p. 252.

[39] Dayeol Ku, "A Damocles Sword?: Korean Hopes Betrayed," in *The Russo-Japanese War in Global Perspective: World War Zero*, ed. John W. Steinberg, David Wolff, Stephen G. Marks, Bruce W. Menning, David Schimmelpenninck Van Der Oye, and Yokote Shinji, vol. II (Leiden: Brill., 2007), p. 449-50.

Russians to move south into Korea at a later date, but the Russians rejected the suggestion.[40] In the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese war, the Japanese proposed partitioning Korea at the thirty-eighth parallel, but the Russians rejected this proposal, only to bring it up again in 1900. The proposal was rejected by the Japanese this time.[41] In 1898, the Japanese proposed that they would recognize Russian control of Manchuria in return for Russian recognition of Japanese control of Korea, but the Russians rejected this proposal. In 1903, the Japanese proposed that there would be a demilitarized zone around the Yalu river between Manchuria and Korea.[42] To counter that proposal, the Russians proposed that the two sides create a neutral demilitarized zone in Korea north of the thirty-ninth parallel while leaving southern Korea within Japan's sphere of influence, but the Japanese rejected this proposal.[43] Believing that Russia was stalling for time to build up their forces in Northeast Asia, Japan, while it believed itself to be the weaker party, launched a surprise attack to defeat Russia in the 1904-1905 war.

The Korean court's foreign policy of pitting great powers against each other instead of seeking a policy with the goal of maintaining a stable regional system also made compromises difficult for China, Japan, and Russia. Korea's foreign policy beginning in the 1880s involved bringing as many foreign powers to compete over Korea to balance against each other. Not only did Gojong, the Korean king, begin a series of diplomatic outreaches to Western powers between 1884 and 1886, Paul Georg von Möllendorff, an influential western advisor in the Korean court, secretly tried but failed to bring Russian military advisors and instructors to Korea in return for

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[40] Kim, "Japanese Diplomacy towards Korea in Multipolarity: History and Trend," p. 162-163.
[41] Peter Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword: The Japanese Penetration of Korea, 1895-1910* (Berkeley: U of California, 1995), p. 173.
[42] Seung-young Kim, "Japanese Diplomacy towards Korea in Multipolarity: History and Trend," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 20.1 (March 2007): p. 161, 164.
[43] Jinwung Kim, *A History of Korea: From "Land of the Morning Calm" to States in Conflict* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2012), p. 311-312.

ice-free ports.[44] Historian Yur-bok Lee writes that Möllendorff in 1885 "attempted a radical reorientation of Korean foreign policy in cooperation with Russia, thereby involving the Chinese, Japanese, British, and Americans and irking them all." By bringing Russia into the Korean question, Möllendorff hoped to pressure the great powers to discuss and agree to keep Korea neutral, but his efforts never materialized.[45] As Hahm Pyong-choon writes, the Korean court's "game only intensified the mutual distrust and belligerence among the three powers [Japan, China, and Russia] and encouraged the fear that Korea might at any time undermine the position of one in the peninsula by snuggling up to one of the others. Moreover, the game helped Koreans to earn a reputation among their neighbors for being tricky and deceitful, thus reinforcing their desire to extinguish Korea's political independence."[46]

Moreover, the Koreans added to the perception of the imbalance of power in the region by siding with the Russians, who were perceived to be the most powerful in Northeast Asia and were seen by all parties in East Asia as well as the Americans and the British as an aggressive, expansionist power. Instead of securing Korea's independence and regional stability, Gojong deepened the deteriorating security dynamic in the region because the Chinese, who were still the most influential forces in the Korean court, tightened their grip on Korea. In turn, China's growing influence in Korea stoked fears in Japan. While the Japanese were cautious in challenging the Chinese during the 1880s, Tokyo felt confident enough to go to war with Beijing in 1894, defeated the Chinese, and pushed them out of the Korean peninsula. Had the Korean court sought to forge closer ties with Japan, China, and the United States to balance Russia while

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[44] Michael J. Seth, *A History of Korea: From Antiquity to the Present* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), p. 240; G. Patrick March, *Eastern Destiny: Russia in Asia and the North Pacific* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), p. 163.

[45] Yur-Bok Lee, *West Goes East: Paul Georg Von Möllendorff and Great Power Imperialism in Late Yi Korea* (Honolulu: U of Hawaii, 1988), p. 1, 95, 103, 210.

[46] Pyong-Choon Hahm, "Korea and the Emerging Asian Power Balance," *Foreign Affairs* 50.2 (January 1972): p. 346.

making reforms to address Korea's internal issues, the Korean peninsula could have served as a more stable buffer zone in Northeast Asia.

Even in the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese war, Gojong, continued to seek Russian assistance and opted for a strategy of manipulating the great powers. He sought to pit Russia against Japan, the strategy known as "ridding Japan by using Russia," all the while reaching out to other Western powers as well as Japan. The 1895 Triple Intervention by Russia, Germany, and France against Japan reinforced Gojong's belief that he could play the different great powers against each other.[47] To provide greater incentives for foreign powers to entangle themselves in Korea, he gave out business rights to gold mines, railroads, and electric systems to Americans, banks and timber rights to the British and the Russians, banking systems and other related concessions to Japan, and many others.[48] According to a foreign diplomat in Seoul at the time, Gojong, through his manipulation of the great powers, felt a sense of self-importance and believed that Korea had become secure.[49] For a brief period, Gojong's strategy worked, although it ultimately proved to be unsustainable. Between 1897 and 1904, Korea was relatively autonomous and had managed to get both Japan and Russia to push each other's influence out of the Korean peninsula. Yet, Japan and Russia continued to fear that the other would eventually grab Korea and therefore felt that a move had to be made before the other actually did, resulting in the war of 1904-1905.

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[47] Chaibong Hahm, "Civilization, Race, or Nation?: Korean Visions of Regional Order in the Late Nineteenth Century," in *Korea at the Center: Dynamics of Regionalism in Northeast Asia,* ed. Charles K. Armstrong et al. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe. 2006), p. 44-45.
[48] Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), p. 124.
[49] Kim, "Russo–Japanese Rivalry over Korean Buffer at the Beginning of the 20th Century and Its Implications," p. 629.

Relative Stability of the Strategic Buffer Space

In addition to the complicated strategic environment, turbulent internal fissures and factional struggles in Korea also led surrounding great powers to see the Korean peninsula as an unstable territory that had to be secured with troops on the ground, exacerbating the competition over the Korean peninsula. The exact details of the palace intrigue during the late 1800s and early 1900s remain too complicated to be explained briefly, with different patronage networks loyal to different loyal figures within the government catering to different foreign powers and harboring different ideas with regard to how Korea should navigate Northeast Asia's great power politics. In short, however, the perceived shift in the direction of Korea's foreign policy whenever a particular faction gained power gave rise to a great sense of uncertainty for all great powers involved.

One very notable incident was the Gapsin coup of 1884. This coup was instigated by a group of pro-Japanese, pro-Western reformist officials in the Korean court. These officials wanted to imitate the successes of Japan's Meiji Restoration, which was seen as the proof that Asians could do as well as Westerners.[50] These reformists also wanted to take Korea out of the Chinese sphere of influence, which was seen as declining, and align with Japan or the West.[51] Within three days, however, the coup was reversed when Chinese troops intervened to return the conservatives and the moderates in the Korean court to power. From that point until the Sino-Japanese War, the Chinese appointed Yuan Shikai as the "imperial resident" (effectively a viceroy) in Seoul to prevent Korea from leaving the Sino-sphere. Such factional struggles and associated policy changes created concerns among great powers.

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[50] Michael Finch, *Min Young-hwan: A Political Biography* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2002), p. 3.
[51] Lee, *West Goes East: Paul Georg Von Möllendorff and Great Power Imperialism in Late Yi Korea*, p. 67.

By the late nineteenth century, the Korean peninsula had effectively become a shatterbelt. The peasant rebellion of 1894-1895, called the Donghak rebellion, was the immediate cause that brought the Chinese and Japanese powers to intervene, leading to war. The rebellion, in which disgruntled peasants rallied around a leader practicing the Donghak religion, frightened the Korean court so much that it requested Chinese assistance to suppress the rebellion. China's intervention, in turn, brought Japan to intervene in Korea, sparking the Sino-Japanese war. The inability of the Korean court to maintain domestic stability and assert its own authority on the Korean peninsula drew in surrounding great powers.

Credible Third-Party Guarantor of Neutrality

At various points since the 1880s, the Japanese, Russians, and Koreans had turned to the United States to guarantee Korea's neutrality. The United States, however, "as a matter of principle" refused to position itself at the heart of Northeast Asia and create an equilibrium between Russia and Japan.[52] Instead, the United States saw support for Japan as a way to balance Russia.[53] The lack of a credible third-party guarantor was another missing ingredient in the great powers' inability to come to a peaceful solution to the Korean question. In this case, the United States had become the world's largest economy by the 1900s and might have had the capacity to play this role. Out of its long-standing policy, however, Washington refused to play this role.

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[52] Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword: The Japanese Penetration of Korea, 1895-1910*, p. 174-175.
[53] Kim, "Russo–Japanese Rivalry over Korean Buffer at the Beginning of the 20th Century and Its Implications," p. 631.

World War I: The Balkan Powder Keg

Between the mid-eighteenth century and early twentieth century, Eastern Europe was a long-standing battleground between Prussians (later Germans), Austrians (later Austria-Hungarians), Ottomans, and Russians and remains a contested space even today. At the intersection among these great powers, Eastern Europe has been a critical security buffer and played the role of a catalyst in igniting World War I. Indeed, Otto von Bismarck was prescient when he said that "one day the great European war will come out of some damned foolish thing in the Balkans."[54] Mutual concerns among great powers over the shifting balance of power in Eastern Europe, volatility in the Balkans, lack of a credible third-party meditator, and maximalist ideologies based on nationalism all played a role in the failure of Europe's great powers to find a diplomatic solution during the July crisis prior to World War I.

Background

Over the past century, scholars, statesmen, and others have come up with different explanations for why World War I occurred. In the beginning, there was Article 321 of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, which held Germany and its allies responsible for the war.[55] During the inter-war years, historians became more sympathetic to Germany. For example, U.S. historian Sidney Fay in 1929 wrote: "No one country and no one man was solely, or probably even mainly, to blame."[56] In *The Guns of August*, published in 1962, Barbara W. Tuchman blames misperceptions and miscalculations for leading to war, while A.J.P. Taylor, in his 1969 book,

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[54] Quoted in Scott Martelle, "Photos from World War I Should Make Us Remember, and Think," *Los Angeles Times*, April 29, 2014, http://www.latimes.com/opinion/opinion-la/la-ol-ukraine-russia-ww1-atlantic-20140429-story.html.

[55] "Historians Split on German WWI Role," Deutsche Welle, July 29, 2004, http://www.dw.com/en/historians-split-on-german-wwi-role/a-1279269-0.

[56] See Sidney Bradshaw Fay, *The Origins of the World War* (New York: Macmillan, 1929).

War by Timetable, blames a rapid and inflexible military mobilization timetable that left the European great powers with little space for diplomacy.[57] Fritz Fischer's famous "Fischer thesis," based on his book, *Germany's Aims in the First World War*, first published in English in 1967, returns to pinning the blame on Germany by arguing that it had aggressive expansionist aims.[58] In more recent times, historians and political scientists have pointed to mutual security concerns among the great powers and have come up with a range of related causes, including variations of preventive war motive.[59]

In many of these explanations, conflict between the German/Austria-Hungarian bloc and Russia/its allies and the role of the Balkans stand out as important factors that helped to trigger the first great war of the twentieth century. After all, the catalyst of World War I was in Sarajevo, where Austria-Hungary's Archduke Franz Ferdinand's assassination became the first shot of the conflict. This section will examine the international and domestic factors surrounding the Balkan buffer's role in starting World War I.

Balance of Power

The Balkans question had become integral to the configuration and shift in Europe's balance of power at the time of World War I. Origins of it all began in the mid-eighteenth century, with the simultaneous rise of Prussia (later to become the core of Imperial Germany) and Russia and corresponding gradual decline of the Ottoman empire since the late seventeenth century, marking the beginning of the so-called Eastern Question: the issue of how European

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[57] See Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Macmillan, 1962); A. J. P. Taylor, *War by Timetable* (London: Macdonald, 1969).

[58] See Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967).

[59] For example, see David Fromkin, *Europe's Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914?* (New York: Knopf, 2004); Jack S. Levy and John A. Vasquez, eds, *The Outbreak of the First World War Structure, Politics, and Decision-making* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014).

powers would handle the Ottoman empire's decline. In 1740, Frederick II of Prussia captured Austrian-ruled Silesia and successfully defended the territory in subsequent wars, turning his country into a major power in Europe. At the same time, between 1768 and 1774, the Russians scored a series of stunning military victories against the Ottoman empire and advanced its troops westward, alarming the rest of Europe, particularly Austria and Prussia. The continued decline of the Ottoman Empire during the subsequent century and into the twentieth century would then leave a power vacuum in Eastern Europe, which a unified Germany and its Austria-Hungarian ally and Russia and its clients would compete over during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Great powers in Central and Eastern Europe prior to World War I were all concerned about how the balance of power might shift over time. In particular, the issue of how the Balkan conflicts would be resolved mattered greatly to the future balance of power in the region. The Russians were concerned with Austria-Hungarian advances into the Balkans and potential threat the German bloc posed to the Turkish straits critical to Russia's maritime trade. The Germans, in turn, saw themselves facing a two-front war as they were trapped between France and Russia and saw the Russians as a growing threat expanding westward, as Saint Petersburg was laying railroads to better transport troops to German borders while advancing influence through client states in the Balkans. The Serbians, who were Russia's clients, saw Austria-Hungary as an obstacle to the creation of a greater Serbia consisting of all southern Slavs. The Austria-Hungarians feared that the Serbians were intent on achieving their dream by subverting and breaking apart the Austria-Hungarian Empire. Both sides had incentives to head off each other's moves in the Balkans.

Nevertheless, balance of power factors, while they point to conflict, do not seem to necessarily indicate that war was inevitable. Even with all the conflictual dynamics, Eastern Europe could have remained in a state of "cold war" and did not have to become a "hot war." To begin with, nationalist revolts in Eastern Europe had already been in process since the early nineteenth century (e.g. the Greek war of independence during the 1820s) and had been a factor in the constant shift in the balance of power. Yet, they did not produce a major European war in Eastern Europe except for the Crimean war. Moreover, the Austria-Hungarian-Serbian outbreak of war in 1914 was not inevitable. Austria-Hungary's Franz Ferdinand, who was the inspector-general of his country's military and effectively commanded all of its troops, was in favor of a more cautious approach with Serbia. He also wanted to turn Austria-Hungary's dual monarchy into a triple monarchy to give Slavs in the empire equal rights as those that Austrians and Hungarians enjoyed. In consideration of going to war with Serbia, he correctly predicted that such a scenario would lead to a Russian intervention and demise of the Austria-Hungarian empire. As Margaret MacMillan notes, "in assassinating Franz Ferdinand[,] the Serb nationalists removed the one man in Austria-Hungary who might have prevented it going to war."[60] Here, a single individual could have played a critical role. Hence, balance of power factors do not seem to provide adequate explanations as causes of World War I.

Relative Stability of the Strategic Buffer Space

The fact that the Balkans region was unstable contributed to the conflictual dynamic, particularly in Serbia, where instability at the governmental level mattered greatly. Serbia had become an acutely destabilizing factor since the 1903 coup in the country. The coup, instigated

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[60] Quoted in Tony Barber, "The Causes of the First World War," *Financial Times*, October 4, 2013, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/248f6960-29d3-11e3-bbb8-00144feab7de.html.

by Dragutin Dimitrijević (who would later become the leader of the Black Hand) and his associates, brought a pro-Russian king, Peter Karageorgevich, to power, greatly alarming the Austria-Hungarians.[61] Austria-Hungary's annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (administered by Vienna since 1878) in 1908 was a response to the coup in order to solidify a buffer region against Serbian nationalism and Russian expansionism. The move, however, was seen as humiliating for the Russians, who saw themselves as guardians of all Slavs.[62] The annexation also further inflamed Serbia's nationalists, and the Black Hand, a secret organization which wanted to use subversion and terrorist tactics to create a greater Serbia, was formed in 1911.

Credible Third-Party Guarantor of Neutrality

Throughout the nineteenth century, the British had played the role of an offshore balancer to maintain the equilibrium in Europe. By the twentieth century, however, Britain could no longer play this role. The first reason was that the meticulously constructed configuration of power in Europe based on the balance of power principle was severely disrupted with Germany's unification in 1871. Before the equilibrium that emerged out of the Congress of Vienna, the German states were too scattered and weak. With the Vienna settlement, Germany was consolidated into larger states that would also be able to act united against external threats. With the 1871 unification, Germany had become too powerful, while the British were overstretched all over the world. When the July crisis erupted in the Balkans, Britain fruitlessly offered to play the role of a mediator several times to no avail. The inability of Britain to maintain its role as an offshore balancer contributed to the outbreak of war in 1914.

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[61] Alexander L. Macfie, *The Eastern Question, 1774-1923* (London: Longman, 1996), p. 50.
[62] William Anthony Hay, "The Twilight of empire," *Wall Street Journal*, August 28, 2015, http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-twilight-of-empire-1440796313.

Ideology Factor

The shift in ideological beliefs among Europeans also exacerbated the conflict in Eastern Europe. Two changes had occurred in Europe by the twentieth century. First, all European governments, whether liberal-leaning or conservative, had become sensitive to public opinion and nationalism. As realists argue, nationalism is the most salient ideology in the world.[63] Second, Europeans had abandoned the ideology of equilibrium and moderation in favor of an ideology based on social Darwinism. These shifts in the nature of governments and policymaking elites made the outbreak of a continent-wide conflict more likely.

To begin with, the Black Hand was a state-sponsored creature of nationalism. Its leader, Dragutin Dimitrijević, was Serbia's head of the military intelligence, although the extent of the Serbian government's involvement in the organization is still a fiercely debated topic. Serbian Prime Minister Nikola Pasic might or might not have known about the plot to assassination the archduke, but he certainly could not or did not stop the event from occurring in time. Regardless of the extent of Belgrade's involvement in Franz Ferdinand's assassination, Serbia would probably be classified as a state sponsor of terrorism in today's context. In fact, Belgrade, despite being a relatively weak state, seemed to have welcomed the imminent outbreak of war out of nationalistic motives during the July crisis, with the Serbian ambassador to Russia gleefully reporting back to Belgrade that Saint Petersburg would be willing to fight for its ally: "This presents to us a splendid opportunity to use this event wisely and achieve the full unification of the Serbs. It is desirable, therefore, that Austria-Hungary should attack us."[64]

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[63] Stephen M. Walt, "Nationalism Rules," *Foreign Policy*, July 15, 2011, http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/07/15/nationalism-rules/.
[64] Quoted in Christopher M. Clark, *How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), p. 468.

Other governments, too, were affected by nationalism. While the governments of Austria-Hungary, Germany, Serbia, and Russia were all authoritarian relative to what one might consider a liberal democracy by contemporary standards, states at that time were intensely sensitive to public opinion. While the European order established after the Napoleonic wars was a conservative one averse to populist sentiments, the revolutions of 1848 taught European elites that they could no longer ignore public opinion and national prestige in their decision-making. The importance of public opinion made backing down or restraining allies difficult once the pre-war crisis hit in July 1914. The Germans gave a so-called blank check to the Austria-Hungarians instead of restraining them, while the French had given their own blank check to the Russians, for example. These blank checks, much in an effort to guard credibility and honor, made conflict resolution difficult.

Furthermore, the ideology of social Darwinism had replaced the norms of balance of power by the late nineteenth century. As historian and scholar of World War I Annika Mombauer notes, prevailing was "the belief that nations and peoples are subject to the same biological laws as animals and that they are going to either rise to the top or they are going to be eliminated in a vying for power," and that a great power has to "eventually fight a war against other powers and, obviously, win that war."[65] The balance of power norm, affirmed and institutionalized during the heydays of the Concert of Europe, was about moderation. Europe during the late ninetieth and early twentieth centuries was about maximizing power and emerging on top. Instead of seeking a win-win situation through diplomacy, great powers at the onset of the Great War in 1914 saw a win-or-lose situation in which the other side either backed down or faced war.

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[65] Dragan Stavljanin, "World War I Anniversary: Five Historians, Two Questions," *Radio Free Europe*, July 28, 2014, http://www.rferl.org/content/wwi-key-questions-war-anniversary-historians/25472768.html.

Assessing the Case Studies

As shown in the four case studies, four key factors, the balance of power among great powers, relative stability of a buffer region, credible third-party guarantor of neutrality, and ideology dimension, all mattered in determining whether great powers competed and went to war over buffer regions.

The imbalance of power or the perception that the balance of power was shifting in favor of one side or the other was an important cause of great power wars over strategic buffer regions. In the Middle Eastern case, there existed a profound imbalance of power between an empire based in Anatolia and one based in the Iranian plateau. The one based in Istanbul (Constantinople) was always more powerful. Hence, these wars were inclined to continue until the Iranians were defeated and retreated into their core territory. In the Korean case, the perception of Russian strength led Saint Petersburg to hold out on compromises over Korea because the Russians believed that they had a stronger hand. The Japanese, perceiving existential dangers, decide to push the Chinese out of Korea and then defeat the Russians in a surprise maneuver. In the Eastern European case, the perception of shifting balance of power dynamics and mutual security concerns regarding the Balkan buffer space were important factors in starting World War I. On the other hand, the calibrated and stable equilibrium based on the settlement drawn up during the Congress of Vienna motivated great powers to find a diplomatic resolution, as no single state had the capacity to override the system.

The nature of buffer regions in question also mattered since buffer regions that were shatterbelts were more difficult to manage than the more organized secession that occurred in the Belgian crisis. In the Middle Eastern case, a myriad of local conflicts, revolts, and shifting loyalties meant that the Byzantines, Ottomans, Sassanids, and Safavids often had to intervene to

secure an area or prevent it falling under the influence of the other side. The micro-scale and complexity of these local conflicts made stabilization of the region difficult. In the Asian case, the Korean asked the Chinese to intervene to suppress a peasant rebellion, while the Japanese intervened in response, resulting in the first Sino-Japanese war. In the Eastern European case, the inability of the Serbian state to properly control or manage a subnational group, the Black Hand, led to the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, catalyzing the July crisis. In the Belgian case, however, the United Kingdom of Netherlands was divided into two entities but did not completely shatter, meaning that the Low Countries did not turn into an unmanageable shatterbelt.

The existence or non-existence of a credible third-party guarantor also determines the ability of great powers to manage buffer space conflicts. In the Middle Eastern case, conflicts were largely between two opposing empires with no third great power. In the Korean case, regional powers involved sought U.S. guarantee of Korean neutrality at various points during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, but Washington refused to take up the responsibility. In the Eastern European case, the British were too weak to be a third-party mediator. In the Belgian case, Britain was able to act as a fair mediator and a credible offshore balancer as an island nation.

The dominant ideology of any given period also affected the decision-making among great powers with regard to buffer space conflicts. In the Middle Eastern case, the wars fought between both sets of empires were highly religious in nature, with the Byzantines championing Christianity, the Sassanids championing Zoroastrianism, the Ottomans championing Sunni Islam, and the Safavids championing Shia Islam. The religion dimension turned their conflicts into existential struggles among the different communities within the Middle East as well as between

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the empires until all sides gradually became exhausted. While less so in the Korean case,

nationalism and social Darwinism were important factors that drove great powers to protect their

credibility and national prestige in the Eastern European case. These ideological outlooks pushed

governments at the time to refuse to back down in crises and led them to give blank checks

instead of practicing alliance restraint. In the Belgian case, governments practiced norms of

equilibrium and moderation and were able to settle the 1830-1831 crisis with a compromise.

Characteristics of Strategic Buffer Space Conflicts and Their Outcomes

	Balance of Power	*Relative Stability*	*Existence of a Credible Third-party Guarantor*	*Prevalent Ideologies*	*Outcome*
Belgian Crisis 1830-1831	Equal and stable, as constructed during the Congress of Vienna	Relatively stable, as the Netherlands did not fracture with Belgium's secession	Yes, Britain played the role	Equilibrium and moderation	No great power war; 1839 Treaty of London
The Middle East between Anatolian and Iranian Empires	Unequal, as an Anatolian empire was often stronger than the Iranian counterpart	Unstable, with a myriad of independent local political entities	No, the Anatolian and Iranian empires competed in an environment of bipolarity	Different religions competing with each other	Great power war; victory by Byzantine and Ottoman empires
Korea between China, Japan, and Russia	Unequal and unstable, as Russia was considered the most powerful and was perceived as rising	Unstable, with competing factions within the Korean government and a peasant rebellion in the country	No, the United States might have played the role but refused to	Competing views of the world order by China, Japan, and Russia	Great power war; Japanese victory over both China and Russia
Eastern Europe before World War I	Unequal and unstable, Germany was considered the most powerful, but Berlin also saw Russia as rising	Unstable, with a subnational, quasi-state sponsored group, the Black Hand, acting autonomously	No, Britain was not powerful enough to play the role	Social Darwinian	Great power war; Allied Powers win

Implications for U.S. Global Strategy

As a distant maritime power with a global presence, capacity, and relationships, the United States is in a unique position to influence conflicts over strategic buffer regions. Yet, U.S. policy in recent years has seen multiple failures in places such as the Middle East and Ukraine. These debacles resulted, in part, because of ad-hoc policymaking based on the immediate circumstances at the time without considering long-term strategic visions. Therefore, U.S. policy

needs to be based on a clear set of principles that pertain to strategic buffer space conflicts, which often erupt in unpredictable manners and catch policymakers off guard.

First and most important of all, the United States should seek to maintain the balance of power among competing regional powers to incentivize them to seek diplomatic solutions over strategic buffer regions. When possible, the United States should support the weaker side in a regional conflict. In dealing with allies, Washington should support them only when they are perceived to be weaker parties and not give unconditional support if they are perceived to be stronger parties. In the latter case, the United States should practice alliance restraint. As shown in the case studies, concerns about losing buffer zones lead the weaker side to make dangerous preventive moves, while the stronger side tends to resist compromises.

Second, the United States should seek to reduce the number of relevant actors in a buffer region through either force, economic incentives, or diplomacy. A buffer conflict is often difficult to resolve because there are too many local actors with competing interests and shifting loyalties. Such situations mean that events on the ground are more likely to drive great power interactions than the other way around. The United States should seek to use its political, economic, and military clout to consolidate as many local groups as possible.

Third, the United States should utilize its unique position to become an honest broker and a third-party guarantor to influence, help stabilize, and guarantee security in buffer regions. To do this, U.S. policymakers should seek to ensure that the U.S. military remains indisputably the most powerful in the world. A step toward this goal would be to increase the defense budget. The most recent defense budget proposal seems to indicate that the United States will be spending only about 3.5 percent of the GDP on defense.[66] The fifty-year Cold War average was

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[66] Patricia Zengerle, "Senate Passes $602 Billion Defense Authorization Bill," Reuters, June 14, 2016, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-defense-congress-idUSKCN0Z0234.

significantly higher at approximately 6.3 percent.[67] The United States can and should spend more than it does today. The United States should also seek to become a fairer mediator in regional conflicts. Supporting allies is important, but doing so unconditionally means that Washington would lose leverage in dealing with adversaries. Only by showing adversaries that the United States has the capacity to both aid and restrain allies, can Washington have influence over all competing sides. Giving unconditional support to allies spoils them while sending a message to adversaries that the only course of action left is resistance. Even if the United States were to not support its allies unconditionally, they will not suddenly turn away from their relationships with Washington, as most of them do not have a ready alternative to replace U.S. security and economic relationships.

Last but not least, the United States should work with other great powers to forge a new world order by reconciling U.S. values with more realist outlooks that other countries, such as China and Russia, ascribe to. Many important states around the world, whether they are adversaries, competitors, or even allies, do not buy into the liberal ideals that underpin U.S. foreign policy. The United States cannot maintain global stability while seeking to impose U.S. ideals everywhere. Yet, it is unrealistic for the United States, a democracy, to abandon its values and adopt the early nineteenth century norms of equilibrium and moderation. Neither can China, Russia, and other realist powers hope to conduct their foreign policy purely based on sphere-of-influence politics when the world's most powerful nation does not wish to adopt such practices. The global community needs another Congress of Vienna in which major powers go beyond the lowest common denominators to make substantial compromises to agree on a set of common principles and values to maintain stability and order.

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[67] Thomas Donnelly, "Romney Defense Spending Proposal a Return to Normal," *Weekly Standard*, May 10, 2012, http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/romney-defense-proposal-return-normal_644346.html.

U.S. policymakers should address the existing strategic buffer space conflicts based on the principles laid out above, instead of coming up with disparate ad-hoc approaches. The two major active buffer space conflicts today are Ukraine and the arc of instability that runs through Iraq and Syria. The two buffer regions that could potentially become flashpoints are the Korean peninsula and the southern Caucasus.

Ukraine: The Eastern European Borderland

The immediate cause of the conflict in Ukraine was then-Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych's refusal in late 2013 to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union. In response, protests in Kiev, so-called the Maidan uprising, occurred to topple Yanukovych and bring a pro-Western government to power. In response, Russia annexed Crimea and intervened militarily in eastern Ukraine to help set up and support separatist movements. Since then, Ukraine has been in a frozen conflict, with fighting regularly breaking out, despite the Minsk II ceasefire agreement in February 2015. The conflict's deeper causes, however, have to do with the post-Cold War balance of power in Europe, nature of the Ukrainian state, and differing worldviews of the United States and Russia.

The profound imbalance of power in Europe that emerged with the collapse of the Soviet Union tempted the United States to expand the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) eastward. This was almost inevitable because NATO was suddenly overwhelmingly dominant on the continent, as the Soviet giant broke into pieces and as Russia entered a period of political, social, military, and economic decline. It is highly unlikely that any U.S. leader would have been able to resist the temptation to expand NATO under such circumstances, including the George H. W. Bush and the Bill Clinton administrations, both of which never explicitly committed to not

expanding NATO.[68] Indeed, former-Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates notes in his memoir:
"When Russia was weak in the 1990s and beyond, we did not take Russian interests seriously."[69]
George F. Kennan called NATO expansion "a tragic mistake," while John Lewis Gaddis wrote
that he had "difficulty finding any colleagues who think NATO expansion is a good idea."[70] As
Russia made its return with rising oil prices and with strongman-rule under Vladimir Putin,
Moscow has predictably been pushing back, not least because Ukraine is the most important
buffer state to Russia. Because the Russians fear that the United States would continue to expand
NATO toward Moscow, they felt that they had to conduct a preventive intervention in Ukraine to
draw the line.

Complicating this conflict is the fact that the east-west split in Ukraine and weakness of
the central government in Kiev have destabilized the country and have created a sense of
uncertainty with regard to Ukraine's future. The country's presidency, since the 1990s, has been
swaying between the country's western regions that are generally pro-West and the country's
eastern regions that want to main close ties with Russia. To oversimplify matters, Leonid
Kravchuk and Viktor Yushchenko are perceived to have been pro-Western leaders, while Leonid
Kuchma and Viktor Yanukovych are perceived to have leaned toward Russia, although both
attempted to strike a balance between the West and Russia. The differences between the two
sides have openly manifested with the Maidan uprising, resulting in the Yanukovych
government's forced ouster by protesters despite the relevant parties having come to a political

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[68] See James Goldgeier, "Promises Made, Promises Broken? What Yeltsin Was Told About NATO in 1993, and Why It Matters," *War on the Rocks*, July 12, 2016, http://warontherocks.com/2016/07/promises-made-promises-broken-what-yeltsin-was-told-about-nato-in-1993-and-why-it-matters/.

[69] Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York, NY: Vintage, 2015), p. 158.

[70] Quoted in Thomas Friedman, "Foreign Affairs; Now a Word From X," *New York Times*, May 2, 1998, http://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/02/opinion/foreign-affairs-now-a-word-from-x.html; John Lewis Gaddis, "The Senate Should Halt NATO Expansion," *New York Times*, April 27, 1998, http://www.nytimes.com/1998/04/27/opinion/the-senate-should-halt-nato-expansion.html.

settlement to resolve the crisis in favor of the opposition. In response, Moscow intervened to counter what it perceived as Kiev's attempt to impose a strongly pro-Western orientation over the entire country. Compared to other shatterbelts, however, there are two generally distinguishable sides, with governing authorities in Kiev, Donetsk, and Luhansk, in this conflict; Ukraine has not collapsed as a state. This factor improves the chance of a diplomatic solution being reached over this conflict.

The differing ideological outlooks of the United States and Russia, however, stand as factors that make settling the Ukrainian conflict more difficult. The United States, a champion of liberal democracies, argues that Ukrainian people should have the freedom to choose their strategic orientation and that the expansion of NATO and the European Union helps to foster the development of a liberal democratic order in Eastern Europe.[71] Russia, on the other hand, sees Ukraine in terms of traditional sphere of influence politics and perceives the United States as aggressively intruding into a country that Russians have historically considered critical for their security.[72] The United States sees Russia's reaction to the events in Ukraine as an authoritarian government's desire to stop the spread of democracy, while Russia sees the same events as U.S. attempts to spread color revolutions for the purpose of drawing target countries into the Western sphere of influence.

To settle the current crisis, Washington and Moscow should work closely together to properly implement the Minsk II agreement. The United States and its European allies will have to restrain and press on the central government in Kiev and also engage in vigorous public

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[71] Claudette Roulo, "Russian Aggression Threatens European Security, Officials Say," *DoD News*, March 10, 2015, http://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/604247.
[72] Peter Beaumont, "Russia Makes Latest High-Risk Move to Keep Pieces of Its 'Near Abroad' in Check," *Guardian*, March 1, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/02/russia-moves-keep-near-abroad-soviet-states-in-check.

diplomacy with the Ukrainian public, while Russia will have to do the same for the eastern separatists. With regard to the status of Crimea, both sides will need to find a creative solution. The hard fact is that Russian troops are holding the territory and will not be leaving any time soon. However, there could potentially be a compromise with regard to the de-jure status of Crimea.

To establish a long-term status-quo in Eastern Europe, however, the United States and its allies should take into consideration Russian concerns regarding the expansion of Western military presence. Moscow's aggression should always be addressed, but Russia today is not the Soviet Union and is facing a drawn-out decline due to a falling population, dysfunctional economy, and low energy prices. Indeed, while many Eastern European countries still fear Russia, Dimitri Simes notes that the overall balance of power is seen by most observers as being in favor of the West with a "significant conventional superiority" vis-à-vis Russia, even though it is still a significant nuclear weapons state.[73] Russian leaders understand their predicament, are cognizant of their limited ability to project their influence into Europe, and see an existential threat in what they perceive to be the westward expansion of Western military presence deep into Eastern Europe. As demonstrated by the case studies of buffer space conflicts from before, a relatively weak power that fears threatened will have strong incentives to take risky and dangerous measures to prevent strategically important buffer regions from falling under a hostile power's influence or control. Addressing this concern is the key to finding a modus vivendi with Russia and establishing lasting stability in Eastern Europe.

The United States should not plan any further introduction or expansion of Western military presence in the region. Furthermore, Washington, Brussels, Moscow, and Kiev should

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[73] Dimitri Simes, "The Perils of a New Cold War," interview by Jeanne Park, Council on Foreign Relations, October 21, 2015, http://www.cfr.org/russian-federation/perils-new-cold-war/p37132.

consider a long-term arrangement in which NATO members pledge to not expand into Ukraine, Kiev pledges to not join any formal military alliance, and Moscow pledges to respect Ukrainian sovereignty and right to engage in political and economic integration with Europe. The Russians understand that invading, occupying, and annexing the entire Ukraine is too costly (Putin understands the lessons from the Soviet Union's collapse too well) and that such attempts could even bring the United States and its European allies to intervene militarily. Based on its limitations, Russia will be satisfied with an agreement that leaves Ukraine out of any Western military alliance. After reestablishing stability in Eastern Europe, Washington and Moscow could then begin to cooperate on a myriad of common interests, including terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and the Middle East.

Iraq and Syria: The Arc of Terror and Violence

The crises in Iraq and Syria emerged out of different causes but have become interconnected to form an arc of instability from the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea to Iraq. The civil war in Syria began as part of the wider Arab Spring phenomenon. The war has split the country between the Assad regime and a myriad of rebel groups, including the Islamic State and Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra). Roots of the crisis in Iraq have to do with the 2003 U.S. invasion of the country. The invasion's aftermath eventually brought about a violent sectarian conflict, during which the Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) became prominent. The conflict ended in 2007, and AQI was weakened, but it was later able to recoup and return to become the Islamic State by taking sanctuary in the chaos created by the Syrian civil war and by taking advantage of the tensions created by then-Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's sectarian rule.

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A profound perception of imbalance of power emerged in the Middle East in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. The power vacuum in the country has given Iran an unprecedented opportunity to extend its influence with its extensive network of militant proxies.[74] Iran suffers from many internal problems, including a dysfunctional economy, low energy prices, a young populace increasingly disenchanted with the theocracy's harsh rule, and a large, but technologically inferior conventional military. Nevertheless, the United States, despite its recent activities in Iraq, is wary of intervening too deeply in the region. In addition, the Middle East's Arab powers are in disarray and are disunited, not least because of the Arab Spring. At the same time, the only regional power genuinely capable of challenging Iran, Turkey, is still reluctant to become deeply involved in the region. Consequently, many in the Iranian regime believe that, despite the challenges they face, Iran is a rising power. In fact, Iran has become more belligerent in the aftermath of the nuclear deal with more aggressive behavior in the Persian Gulf, more funding for its proxies, and ballistic missile tests.[75] In response to Iran's perceived rise, Saudi Arabia has been seeking to roll back Iranian influence with all available means, including by supporting Islamist rebel groups of jihadi-salafi varieties in Syria.[76]

The fragmented nature of Iraq and Syria, which have become quintessential shatterbelts, with numerous sectarian, ethnic, and tribal entities competing for survival and power, also perpetuates the current crises in the Middle East. With scores (and hundreds at the micro-level) of local political entities competing with each other, finding a diplomatic solution becomes near impossible because external powers often have little or no control over these small entities.

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[74] See Karim Sadjadpour and Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Iran in the Middle East: Leveraging Chaos," FRIDE, May 27, 2015, http://fride.org/publication/1263/iran-in-the-middle-east:-leveraging-chaos.

[75] Yousef Al-Otaiba, "One Year After the Iran Nuclear Deal," *Wall Street Journal*, April 3, 2016, http://www.wsj.com/articles/one-year-after-the-iran-nuclear-deal-1459721502.

[76] Danielle Ellison, "Saudi Arabia and the Syrian Civil War," Foreign Policy Initiative, April 15, 2016, http://www.foreignpolicyi.org/content/fpi-bulletin-saudi-arabia-and-syrian-civil-war.

Furthermore, the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad is playing his patrons, Iran and Russia, against each other to prevent them from imposing their will on him.[77] Moscow and Tehran have to be willing to use their leverage over Assad to move toward a diplomatic solution, but both capitals fear that attempts to pressure him will push his regime toward one side or the other, and Iran-Russia relations remain strained, as demonstrated by the controversy over the Russian use of the Hamadan air base.[78] In addition, the religious dimension of the conflict in the Middle East has also increased its destructiveness, as Iran and Saudi Arabia have been using their brands of Shia and Sunni Islam to aid and galvanize their proxy actors throughout the region.

The long-term objective of the United States in the Middle East should be restoring the balance of power in the region by pushing back against Iranian influence. Unless this imbalance is corrected, the Iranians are likely to continue their aggressive policy, while the Saudis and others are likely to continue utilizing every available means to resist what they perceive as Iranian attempts at regional hegemony, both sides destroying the Middle East in the process. The rise of the Islamic State is merely a symptom, albeit a very serious one, of the current imbalance of power in the region. Pushing back against Iranian influence, however, does not mean Iran cannot be integrated into the regional order, but that Washington should first knock Tehran off its high horse.

Over the short-term, this is not possible. Arab powers are too disunited and disorganized, while Iranian influence is deeply entrenched in the region. The Russians are also providing air support to the Assad regime, meaning that direct attempts by the United States to bring down the

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[77] Christoph Reuter, "Why Assad Has Turned to Russia for Help," *Spiegel*, October 5, 2015, http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/syria-leader-assad-seeks-russian-protection-from-ally-iran-a-1056263.html.

[78] Reuters and AP, "Iran Says Russian Use of Air Base for Syria Strikes Over 'For Now,'" *Japan Times*, August 22, 2016, http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/08/22/world/iran-says-russian-use-air-base-syria-strikes-now/.

regime risks a confrontation with Russia. Most importantly, the Islamic State has emerged as the most important priority for the United States and its European allies, but not for any of the regional powers. For the Turks, the Kurdish issue is the important; the Kurds are prioritizing ethnic Kurdish areas; the Saudis and opposition rebels are focused on rolling back Iranian influence; the Iranians are prioritizing the Assad regime's survival. The United States does not have a dependable ally on the ground against the Islamic State, and it is hard to make the case for focusing on rolling back Iranian influence as long as the Islamic State remains a serious threat.

For now, the United States should increase military and intelligence cooperation with the Arab states in the region, help them manage internal problems (for example, refugee management in Iraq and Jordan), and bolster their stability and capabilities. In Iraq, Washington should come to an agreement with Baghdad to further increase U.S. military and economic involvement in the country and to be able to station troops over a prolonged period of time (or even permanently, if possible) in order to continue training and developing Iraqi security forces. A long-term military presence could strengthen U.S. political influence among different groups and politicians in Iraq, provide a tool of leverage for Baghdad against Tehran, and create space for the numerous ethnic, tribal, and sectarian groups to work with each other, with the long-term objective of strengthening Iraqi nationalism and social cohesion. General Lloyd Austin, then-U.S. commander in Iraq (September 2010 to December 2011), recommended that the United States should leave approximately 23,000 troops in the country.[79] Perhaps a similar number of troops could be stationed in Iraq for the long haul, based on advice from commanders on the ground.

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[79] Rowan Scarborough, "President Obama Ignored General's Pleas to Keep American Military Forces in Iraq," *Washington Times*, June 15, 2014, http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/jun/15/obama-ignored-generals-pleas-to-keep-american-forc/.

In addition, the United States could potentially benefit by settling the crisis in Ukraine and by improving relations with Russia. Moscow has a certain level of leverage over the Assad regime, as the Russians are giving military support to the regime. Moreover, Washington and Moscow share a common interest in combatting Islamic terrorism. The two sides might not come to agree on the Assad regime's fate, but improved U.S.-Russia relations could help the United States and its allies better combat the Islamic State. In addition, Russia's priority in Syria is stability; Moscow is not wedded to the Assad regime. Better relations with Russia could potentially open up a range of new possibilities for addressing the current crises in the region.

The long-term strategy for the United States to address the Middle Eastern chaos has to be about pushing Turkey to do more in the region. An Anatolian power has historically been a counterweight to an Iranian power. Despite the recent coup attempt and mass purges that will temporarily weaken its military, Turkey is the only regional power with long-term political, economic, and military foundations to balance Iran and help stabilize the Middle East. The Israelis are limited in their capacity because of their geographical vulnerability and the small size of their population, while the long-term future of the Saudi state remains uncertain, with low energy prices and domestic problems.[80] Despite misgivings about the direction of Turkey's internal political development, Washington should seek greater cooperation with Ankara and continue to prod the Turks to do more to deal with the different threats emanating from Iraq and Syria and establishing security ties and presence throughout the region. This will not happen overnight and will likely be a messy process, but there is never a silver bullet to problems in the Middle East.

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[80] John Hannah, "It's Time for the United States to Star Worrying about a Saudi Collapse," *Foreign Policy*, October 7, 2015, http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/07/will-the-united-states-help-if-saudi-arabia-starts-to-fall-apart/.

The Southern Caucasus: Instability Slowly Grows

The southern Caucasus has historically been a point of conflict between an Anatolian and an Iranian power since the ancient times. With the rise of Russia, competition over the region became a three-way conflict. From the nineteenth century until the early 1990s, however, the Caucasus was largely under Russian domination. With the Soviet Union's collapse, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia became independent. Armenia is heavily dependent on Russia for political, economic, and security reasons; Georgia has oriented itself toward the West; Azerbaijan has close ties with Turkey and is seeking to balance between Russia and the West to extract as many benefits from both. In addition, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia eventually emerged as disputed regions. Since the wars of the 1990s, the southern Caucasus has consistently seen small-scale conflicts, but the region's historic great powers, Iran, Russia, and Turkey, have yet to become embroiled in a major conflict over the region yet. A number of factors, however, point to growing instability.

The most important trend is that the balance of power among Iran, Russia, and Turkey is expected to shift over time. Russia faces long-term decline; Iran is becoming more assertive throughout the Middle East and beyond; Turkey is increasingly becoming a consequential player in its neighborhood. The United States and the European Union are also seeking to make their inroads into the region, particularly through energy diplomacy, as Washington and Brussels see Caspian energy supplies as having the potential to lessen Europe's gas trade with Russia.[81] Over time, these competing powers, particularly Iran and Turkey (even as the former, for now, has less

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[81] For example, see Daniel J. Graeber, "Azerbaijan: U.S. Support for Gas Networks Vital," United Press International, March 31, 2016, http://www.upi.com/Business_News/Energy-Industry/2016/03/31/Azerbaijan-US-support-for-gas-networks-vital/7471459415985/; Robert M. Cutler, "Azerbaijan Gas Still on Target for Europe after Turkish-Russian Shootdown," *Asia Times*, December 7, 2015, http://atimes.com/2015/12/azerbaijan-gas-still-on-target-for-europe-after-turkish-russian-shootdown/.

capacity to influence the region than others), will likely seek to expand their influence in the southern Caucasus, while Russia will seek to hold on to its influence in the region as much as possible.

As Russia's influence in the southern Caucasus wanes over the long-term, tensions among the Caucasian states and disputed regions will likely increase and turn the region into a shatterbelt, leading to crises that could draw outside powers to intervene. The most likely flashpoint is the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, which is already seeing some nascent signs of this trend. As low energy prices and Western sanctions hit Russia in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis, there have been increasingly dangerous military clashes between Azerbaijan and Armenia, notably the April 2016 clash, which resulted in 350 deaths, according to the U.S. Department of State.[82] Experts generally argue that Azerbaijan started the conflict either to stoke nationalist sentiments in times of falling energy prices (which the Azerbaijani economy depends on) or to shift the status-quo in Baku's favor while Moscow, Yerevan's ally, is under internal and external pressure.[83] In response to the recent clashes, Moscow has been engaging in diplomatic maneuvering, and there are possibilities of potential deals that involve Armenian concessions to Azerbaijan on Nagorno-Karabakh.[84]

Even if this conflict were to be settled, the volatile nature of the region will likely mean that the southern Caucasus will continue to be a shatterbelt that could draw in external powers to

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[82] "Background Briefing on the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict," U.S. Department of State, May 16, 2016, http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/05/257263.htm.
[83] For example, see Thomas de Waal, "Prisoners of the Caucasus: Resolving the Karabakh Security Dilemma," Carnegie Europe, June 16, 2016, http://carnegieeurope.eu/2016/06/16/prisoners-of-caucasus-resolving-karabakh-security-dilemma/j1yq; Pavel Felgenhauer, "An Unfrozen Karabakh Threatens to Ignite Entire Region," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 13, Issue 88, May 5, 2016, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=45403&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&c=q5Etn1H z4wFmHPD7KKvEvkhef1Z3xk3hyqXAS7MiXLM&mkt=en-us.
[84] Matthew J. Bryza, "Two Surprising Proposals for Peace in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict," Atlantic Council, August 18, 2016, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/two-surprising-proposals-for-peace-in-the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict.

intervene. The Caucasus is a region defined by ethnic, nationalistic, and territorial conflicts, while Iran, Russia, and Turkey all consider the region to be part of their historical spheres of influence. Turks have close ethnic and cultural ties to Azerbaijanis, while there is a large Azerbaijani minority group within Iran, which Tehran keeps a close watch on and considers a potential source of domestic instability. There is a myriad of factors that could become catalysts for conflict in the region.

The United States should consider the long-term regional dynamics over the Caucasus to better manage future crises in the region. As an initial step, the United States should settle the crisis in Ukraine and improve relations with Russia, which is still the most influential power in the southern Caucasus but is expected to gradually lose clout over time. Moscow could be tempted to make aggressive moves in response to perceived encroachments by other major powers in the region. To manage this dynamic, the United States should seek a model based on close cooperation with Russia in engaging any of the Caucasian states and avoid creating any perception that Washington or Brussels is seeking to replace Moscow as the most influential actor in the region. The United States should also restrain Turkey and push back against Iran if they become too assertive in their attempts to increase their influence in the southern Caucasus.

The United States also has an interest in seeing sustainable stability within the Caucasian shatterbelt. Increasing confidence of energy-rich Azerbaijan, which has grown powerful relative to Armenia, has emerged as a recurring source of instability. The United States and the European Union should work closely with Russia to restrain Azerbaijan and to prevent any crises from escalating, particularly vis-à-vis Turkey. The conflict in the southern Caucasus has yet to fully emerge, but the United States and the European Union can take preventive steps now in cooperation with Russia to ensure that the region does not become another conflict zone.

Korea: A Powder Keg at the Heart of Northeast Asia

Situated at the heart of Northeast Asia, the Korean peninsula has historically been the pivot of contention whenever great power competitions emerged in the region. As China reemerges, Japan reenergizes, and the United States rebalances, Korea's strategic significance will only grow, and the Korean question will likely return. The shifting balance of power in the western Pacific, the possibility of instability within North Korea, and regional tensions imbued with powerful currents of nationalism make the Korean peninsula a dangerous flashpoint.

The most dangerous contingency to watch for is a North Korean instability scenario, which could turn the Korean peninsula into a shatterbelt and draw the United States and regional powers into a dangerous conflict. To begin with, how events on the ground in such a situation might unfold is uncertain. What will happen to North Korea? When and how will it fall? No government has answers to any of these questions. There will also be concerns about loose weapons of mass destruction, refugee flows, and possibilities of civil war among different North Korean military factions, some of which might seek foreign assistance. Many unforeseen events could push outside parties to intervene. The element of unpredictability and unintended consequences surrounding North Korea's future drastically increases the danger that an inadvertent series of events following the country's collapse might escalate out of control, as policymakers scramble to improvise their responses on a minute-by-minute basis.

Furthermore, such a contingency would be occurring when there is a perception of China's rise and the United States' decline and increasing competition between the two sides. During a North Korean collapse scenario, both sides would have strong incentives to shape the outcome to shift the balance of power in favor of one side or the other. Washington would be motivated by the desire to lock the entire Korean peninsula within the U.S.-South Korea alliance,

while China would be motivated to shape the outcome of Korean unification to prevent what the Chinese perceive as a U.S. policy of containment. Given that Chinese have historically considered Korea to be critical to their security, Beijing will consider the expansion of the U.S.-South Korea alliance into northern Korea as a serious threat.

The perceived evolution of the strategic environment in East Asia, however, is much nuanced. East Asian countries are concerned about China's rise, but they also benefit from China's economic growth. In terms of the balance of power, the United States remains the dominant power, and, while the Chinese see themselves as a rising power, they see it as a long-term prospect. As Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi noted, Beijing believes that "the [United States] will probably remain the world's [number one] for a fairly long time."[85] The Chinese also understand that they have numerous internal politico-economic problems and believe that China is "hemmed in on all sides by the [United States], Japan, Taiwan, the ASEAN countries, and Australia, and facing an increasingly unilateral, even imperialist, America."[86] Relative to Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and the southern Caucasus, the broader strategic, if not tactical, shift taking place in East Asia is the most complicated of them all. Hence, U.S. policy in the western Pacific must be a carefully calibrated one that involves both balancing and accommodating China's gradual rise, reassuring but also restraining allies and partners, and finally engaging the entire region holistically to sustain peaceful competition and collaboration without creating a Cold War-like atmosphere. The same principle should be applied to the Korean peninsula.

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[85] Quoted in Laura Zhou, "United States to Remain World's Number 1 Power 'for a Fairly Long Time': Beijing," *South China Morning Post*, May 21, 2016, http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1948896/united-states-remain-worlds-number-1-power-fairly-long.

[86] Yin Chu, "China's Foreign Policy Isn't Transparent? You've Got to Be Kidding," *China File*, August 1, 2015, https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/two-way-street/chinas-foreign-policy-isnt-transparent-youve-got-be-kidding.

Based on recent events, however, Northeast Asia seems to be heading toward gradual

bifurcation, with China on one side and the United States, Japan, and South Korea on the other.

Until now, Seoul, caught between Washington and Beijing, was able to maintain good relations

with both and was seen by many as having the potential to become a bridge-builder in the

region.[87] Yet, as demonstrated by the controversies relating to the Terminal High-Altitude Area

Defense (THAAD) deployment, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and South China Sea

disputes, South Korea is increasingly being pushed to take sides. Indeed, with China's

unwillingness to crack down on the North Korean threat, the U.S.-South Korea alliance has

decided to deploy THAAD, while Seoul and Tokyo have reached an important agreement on the

comfort women issue in December of 2015 and are slowly moving toward greater trilateral

security cooperation with the United States to better deal with the North Korean threat. The

Chinese, however, see THAAD as part of a broader U.S. strategy of encirclement.[88]

The United States and China also differ at the ideological level, which could become

problematic in dealing with a North Korean instability scenario. Neither side understands the

East Asian regional order in terms of equilibrium and moderation. The United States seeks to

maintain and expand what it sees as a benevolent liberal international order, one that the rest of

the world should endeavor to be part of. Washington will consider the extension of a robust U.S.-

South Korea alliance over the entire Korean peninsula as expanding the U.S.-led world order.

The Chinese, on the other hand, see East Asia as their historic sphere of influence to be

reclaimed one day and believe that the United States is an alien power and that the U.S. alliance

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[87] Minghao Zhao, "Korea's Middle-Power Diplomacy," *Korea Herald*, September 11, 2015, http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20150911001126.
[88] Sungtae "Jacky" Park, "How China Sees THAAD," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 30, 2016, https://www.csis.org/analysis/pacnet-32-how-china-sees-thaad.

with South Korea has no place in a world without the North Korean threat. Reconciling these two visions of regional order in East Asia will be difficult.

In such a context, an instability scenario in North Korea could prove to be surprisingly dangerous. It is not hard to imagine a situation in which Chinese troops enter northern Korea during an instability scenario either to frighten the United States by increasing the risk of a U.S.-China confrontation and/or to have a say in the geopolitical arrangement in a unified Korea, in addition to meeting other objectives, such as establishing a buffer zone to contain refugee flows and securing North Korean weapons of mass destruction. Many Chinese experts during Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues have frequently asserted that Beijing would be forced to intervene with troops if U.S. or South Korean troops enter the North during an instability scenario.[89] In addition to entering North Korea, the Chinese military could hold large-scale military exercises near the China-North Korea borders and in the Yellow Sea and engage in risky military maneuvers near U.S. and South Korean military assets. Beijing could then make a diplomatic overture to settle the crisis on Chinese terms.

The presence of Chinese troops in northern Korea would substantially raise the risk of a U.S.-China confrontation and would also give China a major bargaining chip. With a troop presence and proxy support in North Korea, the Chinese could push for a reconfigured U.S.-Korea alliance with little or no U.S. troops on the Korean peninsula, a special status for northern Korea, or even a complete end to the alliance. The South Koreans, however, might not be willing to give major concessions to the Chinese because the issue would be tied to national sovereignty. With both the Chinese and South Korean sides having a great stake in northern Korea, the risk of escalation and war would suddenly become very real. In such a situation, the United States

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[89] From not-for-attribution Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues the author participated in.

would have the choice of fully backing its ally, thereby escalating the crisis, or choosing to break with South Korea to manage the situation through diplomacy from a regional standpoint by giving China a larger voice. The latter choice could deescalate the situation, but the United States would be seen as having lost Korean trust.

Whether the end of North Korea will come in a year or ten years is unclear, but the United States and other relevant powers, notably China and South Korea, should immediately begin to discuss and prepare for the eventuality, as the Kim regime's demise could have dangerously destabilizing consequences for Northeast Asia. The Chinese are generally loathe to have serious discussions on a North Korean instability scenario because they fear antagonizing the North Korean regime, but there are measures that Washington and Seoul can take unilaterally.[90]

To begin with, the United States and South Korea should discuss and declare that no U.S. military personnel will cross the thirty-eighth parallel into northern Korea without clear UN Security Council (UNSC) authorization, during or after the process of collapse or unification, as long as other outside nations' troops, whether in uniform or not, do not cross the Yalu river either—but that U.S. troops will automatically enter the North if outside nations' troops do so without UNSC authorization. South Korean troops should be the only ones entering the North in the absence of UNSC authorization. Stabilizing North Korea in case of an instability scenario is expected to require an immense amount of manpower. Based on "optimistic" calculations, Bruce W. Bennett and Jennifer Lind estimate that stabilizing North Korea will require between "260,000 and 400,000 troops," which would be approximately half to two-thirds of the current

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[90] Yun Sun, "The North Korea Contingency: Why China Will Not Cooperate," 38 North, July 25, 2014, http://38north.org/2014/07/ysun072514/.

South Korean military strength.[91] Without U.S. troop support, the South Korean military alone will likely have a difficult time stabilizing the North, particularly if taking into account the need to reserve troops for territorial defense and other tasks. Nevertheless, sending U.S. troops north of the thirty-eighth parallel dramatically increases the risk that Chinese troops will intervene; such a scenario would make the process of stabilization and unification even more difficult and also could lead to a dangerous conflict between the United States and China. By pledging that no U.S. troops will be in northern Korea as long as other outside nations' troops also stay out, the U.S.-South Korea alliance could potentially lay the first step toward cooperation with China on unification.

In addition, Washington and Seoul should declare that, if Beijing accepts the default expansion of the U.S.-South Korea alliance into northern Korea without raising any issues, most U.S. ground troops will leave the Korean peninsula in the event of successful unification and that they will not return unless Korean sovereignty comes under an immediate threat of violation. These measures could ensure the continuation of the status-quo by keeping both U.S. and Chinese troops out of northern Korea and by compensating for the expansion of the U.S.-South Korea alliance into northern Korea with a major U.S. ground troop reduction. Seoul should also declare that Chinese possessions and investments in northern Korea will be protected. This compromise solution seeks to assuage China's concerns about a unified Korea by opting for a moderate arrangement crafted to maintain the overall equilibrium in the regional balance of power.

The United States should also ensure that the Northeast Asian security environment does not become bifurcated and inflexible. Washington should be cautious in pushing Seoul to take

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[91] Bruce W. Bennett and Jennifer Lind, "The Collapse of North Korea: Military Missions and Requirements," *International Security* 36.2 (Fall 2011): p. 3.

sides on regional issues such as territorial disputes. South Korea having good relations with both the United States and China will be important in managing any North Korean instability scenario, while the perception that Seoul is being pulled into a coalition to contain Beijing could be a major liability. The United States should let South Korea develop close ties with China. South Korea has no interest in becoming a tributary state to China and shares an interest in maintaining the liberal world order; Seoul will not slip into Beijing's orbit. If China continues to push against interests shared by the United States and South Korea, Seoul will eventually become more active in countering Chinese revisionism, but the United States should be patient and allow the process to play out organically. Strong Beijing-Seoul relations could have immense utility in handling a North Korean collapse scenario in a peaceful manner and in maintaining stability in Northeast Asia.

Conclusion

The United States is entering a new phase in its foreign policy. The Cold War, defined by the U.S. struggle against the Soviet Union, has been over for more than a generation, while the post-Cold War era, defined by reckless assertion of U.S. power to shape the world in America's image, is also coming to an end. The United States is still the most powerful nation in the world and will likely remain so for decades to come, but Washington faces a new era of disorder, in which neither the Cold War-era nor post-Cold War approach to foreign policy is appropriate. The United States needs to adopt a more nuanced approach and set of principles based on the relevant lessons learned from buffer space conflicts throughout history in order to deal with the diverse array of regional challenges that persist today.

As argued in this report, great power conflicts over strategic buffer space occur and persist because of four reasons. First, an imbalance of power surrounding a buffer region leads the stronger side to refuse reasonable compromises, while the weaker side makes dangerous preventive moves to secure the buffer in anticipation of a worse outcome. Second, strategic buffer regions are often shatterbelts that are unstable or contain multiple local actors, making a diplomatic solution difficult as external actors are unable to control events on the ground. Third, the absence of a credible third-party guarantor that is able to underwrite a strategic buffer region's security, stability, and neutrality often becomes an issue. Last but not least, the existence of a world order based on norms of equilibrium and moderation helps great powers find solutions based on compromises, but the emergence of such an order has been rare in history; most historic eras have been defined by clashes of differing conceptions of world order.

To deal with buffer space conflicts, the United States should always prioritize restoration of a stable regional balance of power, seek to reduce the number of local actors in a region, maintain U.S. military power and seek to become an honest broker among competing regional powers, and work with other great powers to compromise and agree on a new set of norms for maintaining global stability and order. In practice, this would mean a different response for each of the conflict zones of the world. The United States should seek détente with Russia, push back against Iranian influence in the Middle East, and carefully calibrate to balance but also accommodate China's rise. With a more nuanced grand strategy, the United States can continue to maintain its standing in the world in a sustainable manner to secure its political, economic, and security interests.