

**FINESSING PRIMACY –
Some military considerations before subversion does us in**

II. REDRESS – WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

Given the vulnerabilities just described, what might the U.S. do to protect itself, thwart subversion, and retain primacy?¹ What kinds of counter-subversion might we engage in? Are there more *unconventional* ways in which to put the military to use, especially since traditional military options like conquest and control remain off the table?

Subversion redux

In no particular order, classic subversion makes use of: material grievances; government dishonesty; the government's inability to deliver services efficiently, effectively, or equitably; and/or the government's inability to provide sufficient security. When authorities fail along any of these dimensions, their failures make it easy to sow dissension and exacerbate distrust.

While the U.S. military itself represents a target for subversion, adversaries need not target the military directly in order to undermine its effectiveness, cohesiveness, or integrity. Anything that undermines public support for the armed forces or a sense of common national purpose will impact servicemembers. But also, when servicemembers find reason to question the worth or purpose of their sacrifice; suspect that civilian and/or senior military leaders are in over their heads; see others profiting at their expense; or find themselves ricocheting between unwinnable foreverness abroad and material profligacy at home, the effects are cumulatively debilitating. Add to this political correctness and a zero defect mentality, and little is left to sustain morale in the face of un-accomplishable tasks.

This is not to suggest that we are there yet with a hollow-*feeling* force, but any clever adversary could push various buttons in order to get us there faster.

It is worth remembering, too, that a functioning democracy requires competent media and an independent judiciary. Both law and order and the media sit well outside the Pentagon's purview. However, when adversaries target either or both, this constitutes an attack on the integrity of our system. As the system begins to unravel, or appears to unravel, the question then becomes: who is responsible for responding – and how? Being able to answer these questions in advance is critical. Not only is confidence in government *the* target for both new- and old-style subversion, but the only way to retain Americans' – and servicemembers' – trust is for government to become *the* authoritative, unimpeachable, credible source of all information about itself.

To counter subversion effectively, government agencies cannot leave it to journalists to try to piecemeal together or ferret out the 'truth' (or what they think the truth is) weeks or months after the fact. Instead, the chief mission of government spokespeople needs to be to report any untoward event, mistake, or wrongdoing before anyone else can. Or, to use a military metaphor, government has to get ahead of the adversary's ability to get inside our OODA loop.²

It is especially critical that the Department of Defense stay ahead of the news cycle for myriad reasons. First, the Pentagon owes servicemembers the truth. Even if service chiefs and senior leaders do not think that subordinates deserve a full explanation, steeped as everyone is in a 'need-to-know/hierarchy-knows-best' culture, coming clean about incidents, accidents, decisions, etc. is of a piece with the military's emphasis on after action reviews and hot washes. More significantly, this is what today's

rising generation of junior officers and younger enlisted members expect of leaders. As ever, whenever the rank and file are not told what they think they deserve to hear, they will put two and two together in whatever way they can, based on whatever facts they can glean. They will then disseminate their version of the truth among themselves and to whoever else might be interested. There is nothing new in this, though what *is* new is the speed and the immediacy with which information and misinformation travel – *and* what can be done with them.

Essentially, military leaders run four considerable risks when they are not forthcoming: 1) they lose control over the official narrative – or the prospect that there might ever be an official narrative that people will believe; 2) they lose control over what is done with whatever narratives others put together; 3) they forfeit their ability to control how subordinates view them; and 4) they forfeit trust.

The Pentagon already suffers from a trust deficit thanks to its decades-long habit of keeping unflattering and embarrassing information hidden behind the cloak of ‘national security.’³ The same applies to Washington writ large. The only way to overcome this is for the Department of Defense (like the U.S. government overall) to break all hard, bad, embarrassing news about itself first. Then, no adversary – or media outlet – can exploit what is not being said. Nor can leaks from disaffected individuals be turned into the drip-drip-drip of death by a thousand doubts.

By being forthcoming as soon as possible after an event, DoD would also bank trust. The Department of Defense can never be transparent about everything the military does in advance; military forces need to retain the element of surprise. But to keep the faith with servicemembers and citizens requires that DoD radically re-assess the timing of *when* information is released. In the same vein, U.S. government efforts to thwart 21st century subversion cannot consist solely of disseminating correct information more quickly and in greater volume than adversaries or misinformed Americans can. Nor will it suffice to simply expose and counter falsehoods; while vital, all such efforts are too reactive; they cede too much initiative to those bent on subversion.

Counter-subversion

In the same ways that adversaries can stir up trouble for the U.S., the U.S. should be able to stir up trouble for others – at least in theory. All countries are riven by fears and fissures, to include fears *of* fissure. That makes them all vulnerable. Fissures run between rulers and ruled, haves and have nots, and members of different communities. If we were less kinetically oriented, we would no doubt already focus on where others’ buttons lie and we would be ready to aggravate, inflame, or rupture and take advantage of their fears.⁴ Except, while the U.S. might be an open society with few firewalls, this is not true of those countries we are most worried about or non-state actors who are already plaguing us. To be able to effectively subvert them requires that we first study them, as in really, seriously study them. We would need to have units dedicated to getting inside – and *staying inside* – competitors’ heads. At the moment we do not have cadres of individuals who specialize in what makes *potential* adversaries tick, and it takes time and skill to build these capabilities. But unless we devote resources to this in advance of opponents hardening themselves, we will never be able to initiate *strategically meaningful* mayhem, let alone prevent blowback.

However, if Washington did assemble teams comprised of the right type of individuals (and we liaised with allies while doing so), we *could* take advantage of events, much as China and Russia already do, events being the thin end of the subversion wedge.⁵ For instance, at present there is no more teachable example of how an event can be put to strategic use than COVID. Consider: even if Beijing did not intend to subvert public health or global well-being, it did a masterful job of facilitating this once COVID

was 'out.' Or, Beijing did a *seemingly* masterful job. I italicize 'seemingly' because despite the incalculable harm COVID has done, China has clearly overreached. No country has yet used China's duplicity against it. Perhaps none has because too many countries remain pharmaceutically, industrially, and/or financially dependent on China. But the fact that every country in the world has been negatively affected makes COVID the ideal reminder of Beijing's perfidy, ruthlessness, deceptiveness, sloppiness, ineptitude, or what have you. At a minimum, Beijing can now be accused of widespread wreckage. Even better, the longer Chinese officials go without offering a credible explanation for COVID's origins, the more legitimacy this lends theories about COVID's deliberate release. At the same time, the fact that no high-ranking government official has issued a public apology and that Beijing has expressed no contrition more than a year and a half after COVID's appearance should be eminently useful against China for years to come.⁶

Military roles and avoiding proxy errors

As for coming up with new ways to preempt and not just combat subversion, the U.S. military could be used more unconventionally itself, especially if it is not going to be used conventionally.

For instance, the U.S. does not nurture military-to-military ties to the extent that it could or should. Yet, no other group of Americans has the same kind of entrée into another country as do members of our military. Nor is there another institution that provides a better window into how a foreign country does (or doesn't) work – logistically, bureaucratically, politically, and sociologically. Because all militaries recruit from a wider swathe of citizenry than can be found in any other organization, with recruits hailing from different regions, different classes, and different ethnic and religious backgrounds, even when a country's military is not as representative as it should be, it will still include a greater cross-section of society than can be accessed through any other means. Also, the fact that everyone in uniform has family members somewhere else, whether in a small town, rural village, major city, and/or a minority community, means soldiers *and* their family members can not only shed important light on what is going on at home, but they double as ideal *disseminators* of information.⁷

Of course, the most important reason to take working with other militaries more seriously is that the more responsible we can help foreign security services become, the fewer inroads their adversaries – or our adversaries – will be able to make.⁸ Over the past seven decades, Washington has paid lip service to this idea and has grown comfortable using a fitful U.S. presence, U.S. assistance, and foreign military sales (FMS) to help 'partners' – thereby gaining access and placement, undercutting competitors' efforts, and/or creating various dependencies and interdependencies abroad. But unfortunately, Washington has frequently done much of this while backing questionable partners.

Here is where hypocrisy becomes relevant again.

Who we are seen to support, how, often contradicts what we say we are about. Take proxy warfare, our preferred mode of fighting during the Cold War and again today. One reason that piling into others' wars remains so attractive is because we still do not want to engage in direct combat with nuclear-armed near peers or others, which is wise. But as our (and others') proxy experiences reveal, the enemies of our enemy's proxies are not always worth assisting.⁹

Paradoxically, one downside to proxy warfare is that it ends up being too lengthy because it is so indirect. Worse, despite the presumption that we can exert useful pressure on Adversary Y by fighting Adversary Y through third party proxies in Country X, the truth is that as soon as we involve ourselves in Country X's war, we tee up unforeseen future problems. This is true whether we connect the dots

between our decade-plus involvement in El Salvador and the rise of MS-13 in the U.S. or reflect back on where our 1980s involvement in Afghanistan landed us twenty years later when, in the wake of 9/11, we got right back into bed with the same mujahadin we had armed and funded previously. Yet, from 2001 onward we also promised the Afghan people that we would help them establish good governance. But – how could we possibly deliver good governance when we were both aligned with warlords and other bad actors *and* we funded them?

Although the idea of using surrogates to humble a competitor might seem clever, anti-American propagandists invariably wind up with all sorts of ammunition. Civilian casualties, landmines, death squads, torture, rape, inhumane prison conditions, and the like all get used against us regardless of who commits them – uniformed U.S. personnel, American contractors, or local surrogates. Or, to bring up an **eighth truism**: the dirty nature of civil wars dirties all participants. Not only do local factions know each other too well, but they have too much at stake to abide by our rules of engagement. We, on the other hand, seldom know them well, if at all, and never have as much at stake – since, if we did, we would not be fighting by proxy.

Because, too, we are operating on other people's turf, we have no choice but to rely on them for everything we cannot logistically provide ourselves. This leaves us controlling very little apart from things like money, weapons systems, and ISR, although even then our military is hamstrung by the catch-22s described on the previous pages.¹⁰

In short, proxy warfare, paints us into a series of impossible ethical corners. Because we refuse to fight directly, we instead try to do so 'by, with, and through' others. But – how is it ethical to *use* others? At some point in the very near future, Washington will be skewered for knowingly, consciously doing this. Then, too, whenever we Americans fail to live up to the principles that we admonish everyone else to live by, we demonstrate how hypocritical we are.¹¹ Still more germane to this article, proxy wars contribute nothing to primacy. If anything, they detract. Not only do they enable critics to pillory our claims to be good global citizens and committed defenders of human rights, but they also make our military look less rather than more capable. This is especially the case when interventions drag on, which they are bound to do since we refuse to fully commit to limited undeclared wars, which is the real problem with proxy anything.

Primacy – and re-framing competition

To quickly recap: 75 years ago primacy was achieved by whoever could afford to produce, and then did produce, the most/worst weapons assemblable at the time. For a number of years that was us, until the Soviets detonated their own atom bomb. Even as recently as three decades ago, being able to mass produce the means of destruction still counted for a lot. But today? Today we have enough conventional weapons to make the rubble bounce several times over, which is something we have demonstrated more than a few times recently – but, to what effect? Using our arsenal in Afghanistan and Iraq has actually made us look weaker and more ineffectual, not stronger. Nor is this just according to foreign critics; growing numbers of Americans agree.¹² As a consequence, some Americans would prefer to abandon primacy.

But while some Americans may be ready to give up primacy, plenty of others still want the U.S. to remain #1.¹³ For numerous Americans, it is inconceivable that some other country might set the rules for us, never mind the rest of the world. Of course, if this is how numerous Americans feel, it must also be how lots of non-Americans also feel: why should we be the ones who get to make rules for them? Isn't there something they can do to stop us? Well, actually, increasingly (as this article has sought to

point out) there are ways to stop us – which should lead us to ask whether there isn't some better way to accommodate both our *and* others ambitions in the 21st century? *Can* we devise some alternative form of competition that satisfies our and others' need to compete, yet still advantages us without so disadvantaging them that they seek to do us in? Or, to recast this in primacy terms: isn't there some way to harness the drive to prove who is 'better than' without this devolving into: "*you think you're better than us?! – we'll show you,*" which is where we are today?

Again, there is more to the quest for primacy than just the impetus to compete. The substance of the competition also matters. This is why, no matter how alluring the idea of diverting competition into something benign and uplifting like High Culture might be, 'benign and uplifting' won't cut it. Nothing cultural or aesthetic is definitive enough to slake the ambitions of those who need to know that they are unqualifiedly, *objectively* best. For people who feel they have something they have to prove (e.g. legions of Americans, as well as proud Chinese, Russians, Iranians, and others), the competition *has* to be over who is superior – and superior *compared to*, not just superior *in*.

Boil all of this down and what we really need to answer is: short of the old standby proofs of supremacy born of power – power, as in '*I/we can make you*' – is there anything else people can use to satisfactorily assert primacy today?

'We'll be us, you be you'

As a thought exercise, how about: whose system comes closest to fulfilling the principles it espouses? Whose political economy best provides for its people as the world looks on? Not whose system best suits everyone. But, whose system best fits *them*?

A competition over who can *demonstrably* and *provably* deliver justice, services, security, and prosperity in accord with *their* moral code would render *posturing* about who has the superior system obsolete. Because the metric for success would shift from whose ideology *sounds* most promising to whose social contract actually delivers on its promise(s), it would hardly matter whether promises were fulfilled by religious edict, royal decree, some other type of fiat, or by vote.¹⁴ The means could vary – hugely.

Under a 'we'll be us, you be you' rubric, too, no country would have to try to be all things to all people, which is an impossible task anyway. Instead, a proud country like China could stay resolutely itself, governed by whatever domestic policies make most sense for it according to its socio-geographic sensibilities, along with its history, values, and vision.¹⁵ Ditto Russia.¹⁶ Ditto us. We Americans would no longer have to think about how to accommodate laws, customs, or practices that are incompatible with those protected by the Constitution. At the same time, we could urge anyone who would prefer to live under some other set of rules (Marxism, sharia, or something else), to find a home elsewhere, and then they should be able to.

Yet another way in which 'we'll be us' would benefit us and everyone else is that it would force us to have to clarify what we stand for; it would compel us to have to perfect whatever we Americans say we value – democracy, a free market, equality of opportunity for individuals, etc.¹⁷ This would mean we would *have* to meaningfully improve lives here, something that in turn would strengthen us domestically.¹⁸ But also, because a (re)formulation based on 'we'll be us, you be you' would shift international competition to who can best live up to the morals *they* espouse, it would liberate everyone to get their own house in order *as they see fit*. Everyone could control the pace of their own progress, and because the contest would be over whose social contract best fits and then provides for *them*, pluralism would be guaranteed. International politics would still be coalitional (a **ninth truism** about

humans and politics), but the ‘with us or against us’ dichotomy that has characterized international relations since the advent of the Cold War, and has stymied progress on pressing global challenges like those thrown up by the environment, climate, disease, etc., would dissolve. New blocs would form, but pluralism would continually re-scramble who aligns with whom over what.

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As further food for thought, if we Americans adopted something like ‘we’ll be us, you be you’ and treated it as a competitive strategy, this would alleviate our chief 21st century foreign policy challenge. No country has advocated the idea of self-determination more vigorously than has the U.S. (and our 28th president). Yet, pushed to its logical conclusion, self-determination promises more than just an end to subjugation and imperialism. It also promises moral pluralism. But, while Washington has led the way in championing wars of liberation rather than wars of conquest, we Americans still do not embrace moral pluralism. We have somewhat accommodated ourselves to cultural pluralism and have come to respect the idea that people eat, dress, sing, and dance differently than we do. But we are not moral pluralists.

Like moral relativism, moral pluralism discomfits us. It does so, in part, because we are schizophrenic about diversity. From the 1960s onward, successive generations of us have been taught to accept variation in whatever features individuals happen to be born with, over which they have no control – like race, gender, intelligence, size, etc. But, when it comes to matters over which individuals do have control – like beliefs, behaviors, and political affiliations – we are expected to be judgmental; agency demands it. In fact, the way our system works, we are encouraged to disapprove of anyone who does not live up to our standards or our morals. And though decreasingly agree on what these are, or what they should be, we nonetheless remain absolutely Manichean in our judgments. Just like our forebears, we think in terms of right and wrong, with right always being superior to wrong.

Without question, our categories for what we consider to be right and wrong have shifted over time. But our adherence to right *versus* wrong remains as prominent as ever, so much so that our inability to be morally flexible may be among our most defining features as Americans. For instance, though we might like to say that all humans should be treated equally, what we really mean is ‘equally under the law.’ Break the law and you are not equal; abide by different laws and you are not the same as us either.

Yet, so long as people in other countries live according to *their* laws and do nothing to jeopardize us or others, what difference do our differences make? Nothing says we need to approve of what they think or do. So what if we consider them misguided. As efforts over the past several decades illustrate, we gain nothing from proselytizing others to become us. Just the opposite. Hectoring others is counter-productive in the 21st century. Let whoever wants to follow our example do so – though for anyone to want to emulate us requires that we first *become* exemplary. The virtuous circle should be obvious: for us to become an exemplar necessitates us getting our own house in order.

To continue with the argument, say that we Americans *could* re-orient competition to whose social contract best fulfills its promise(s). Then, imagine that we strove to fulfill our potential. Not only should we wind up with a system that works as well as the most ambitious among us can make it work, but making it work should get us off of the hypocrisy hook. Without hypocrisy as a weapon, rivals would have no way to get us to undo ourselves. By living up to our potential, we would also make it next to impossible for anyone to outdo us either.

Of course, the likelihood that we could decant international competition in such a way as to impel countries to become the best possible versions of themselves will strike most readers as hopelessly Pollyannaish. But, when you consider what will happen if we don't do something to deflect competition from subversion and destruction to something *non*-destructive but equally assertive, what else comes to mind?

Herein lies our 21st century predicament.

CONCLUSION

To recap, we humans are no less competitive today than we were 75, 175, or even one thousand and seventy-five years ago. Nor are we any less ambitious or any less devious. Yet, what almost everyone writing about foreign policy and national security overlooks today are the 21st century implications of these urges.

The urge to compete is integral to the quest for fame, fortune, status, prominence, and even primacy; it supersedes and drives them all. Similarly, while destruction represents a shortcut to property, wealth, and power, it too is an urge unto itself. The danger destruction poses (beyond the obvious), however, is that it represents the default means by which to topple any Goliath, especially since we live in a post-conquest age. Or, to put this in the vernacular: if adversaries no longer think they can beat and then subjugate us, why shouldn't they at least try to ruin or eliminate us as contenders instead?

Since it would be suicidal for any great or small power to take on the U.S. in a direct military contest, anyone who objects to our primacy has no choice but to try to undermine us by other means. The easiest means available today involve subversion. Adversaries can attempt to subvert us directly; they can try to subvert our relations with others; they can stir up trouble they know we will feel compelled to wade into; and/or they can bait us into making any one of a number of other debilitating errors. The possibilities are actually legion for anyone who studies us and knows where our buttons are.

Even better (from our competitors' perspective) is that subversion does not invite the same kind of response as would an outright overt attributable attack; subversion will not provoke the same reaction as a Pearl Harbor or 9/11.¹⁹ With nothing to viscerally or visually rally us, subversion will not galvanize or unite us. Its aim is actually the opposite – and once our disagreements over how to arrest our unraveling gather sufficient steam, full-blown dissolution is all too likely to follow.

Subversion can also be accomplished by adversaries making us look impotent and incapable to domestic and foreign audiences alike. By doing things to us that we cannot effectively counter, adversaries can ensure our policy makers and politicians stay at each other's throats. Maybe this provocation will be at some distance: for instance, would anyone have predicted the speed or cunning with which the Chinese constructed islands in the South China Sea? Why didn't anyone predict this? What is wrong with our intelligence agencies?! Or it could be over a domestic matter, involving elections or oil pipelines.

When you begin to think about all of the ways in which competitors and adversaries can inflict damage, set traps, cause lasting harm, or simply parasitize us, it should be obvious why we need to at least think about re-framing competition while we still can. If, too, we cannot be sure we will prevail, we don't just risk being neutered, we risk being undone.²⁰

For pragmatic reasons, too, we Americans should also want to adopt a foreign policy and a national security strategy that costs less, risks less, but *still* advantages us, yet does so without inflaming others. This is why, no matter how crucial it is to continue to strive to best competitors in certain fields, we need to stop advertising that this is our intent. Likewise, we need to stop talking about all of the different forms of power we can wield: soft, smart, sharp, or what have you. We need to stop crowing about how much better we are than everyone else since continually boasting about how great we are is gratuitously incendiary. So is throwing around our still-considerable weight. All of this only goads others to want to – nay, **to compete to** – do us in.

We Americans need to recognize the extent to which we *can* be subverted – especially since our need to be #1, to act like #1, and to object to anyone else supplanting us *invites all but a military attack*.

Meanwhile, just because this article has highlighted subversion does not mean that subversion is the only means by which adversaries and competitors can disrupt or undermine us.²¹ To describe other things they could do, though, hardly seems responsible in an unclassified forum. Nor would it be responsible to spell out all of the ways in which we could undo them, if it came to that.

Finally, I cannot help but ask again: *could* ‘we’ll be us, you be you’ really work as a competitive strategy? The fact that nothing like it has been tried before makes this an impossible question to answer. But it is difficult to imagine what apart from adopting such a rubric might keep incompatible rival ambitions in check in the 21st century. If ‘we’ll be us, you be you’ does not resolve how we and rivals might peaceably mutually assert ourselves, then someone had better come up with some other method for shifting competition to fields in which we Americans *can* prevail, and over which we know we can *retain* control. Otherwise, we will continue to be split asunder by smart sabotage. Nor will it just be our primacy at stake. There is also our integrity to consider – both literally, as in our 50 (still) united states and, figuratively, as in whether we deserve to remain **THE United States**.

¹ The deeper question here might be: what can the U.S. do to protect its primacy in relation to things like rules that render contestation fair to all parties *while also* ensuring that we are not targeted because the rules especially favor us? Of course, just posing such a question is itself somewhat inflammatory.

² OODA stands for observe, orient, decide, act – first conceived by John Boyd in relation to air-to-air combat.

³ By way of just one example: it took considerable pressure before the Army came clean about the friendly fire incident that killed former Ranger and football star, Pat Tillman: “Within days of the incident, top military officials knew Tillman had died as a result of friendly fire. They withheld that information from the public and Tillman’s family because it didn’t fit the narrative of football player-turned-Army warrior dies an American hero fighting off the enemy. Lieutenant General Stanley McChrystal approved the Silver Star citation on April 28, 2004, less than a week after his death with a detailed account, including the phrase “in the line of devastating enemy fire.” It never happened. When the nationally televised memorial service took place 11 days after Pat’s death, the truth remained untold. Five weeks after Tillman’s death, the Army finally admitted what had happened. The coverup could continue no longer. There was too much pressure. In March 2007, after the Pentagon released its report on the events surrounding Tillman’s death and coverup, his brother Kevin testified before congress and had some pointed words for the military. ‘The deception surrounding this [Tillman] case was an insult to the family: but more importantly, its primary purpose was to deceive a whole nation. We say these things with disappointment and sadness for our country. Once again, we have been used as props in a Pentagon public relations exercise” (Kyle Dalton, “Evidence shows Pat Tillman murdered according to medical experts,” <https://www.sportscasting.com/evidence-shows-pat-tillman-murdered-according-to-medical-experts/> April 22, 2020).

⁴ As outlined in a 2017 Naval Postgraduate School project on “Existential Fears.”

⁵ Of course, possessing such a capability is different from using such a capability, or being able to intimate that we might. All three prospects are useful in very different ways.

⁶ Meanwhile, since the CCP will continue to work overtime to deflect responsibility and shirk blame, COVID cannot be the only dereliction by Beijing that Washington makes use of in the future. Portfolios should be compiled on everything harmful, hurtful, insulting, endangering, and duplicitous the Chinese are doing and have done, or have appeared to fund or been involved with. For instance, what have the Chinese said and done that reveals their disdain for other nationalities and members of other races? Where have Chinese state-run businesses damaged the environment and in what ways? Where have their safety lapses caused casualties? Which of their exports have sickened people (and pets)? Evidence should be compiled in detail. The point of keeping book on China’s misdeeds is not just to catalog Beijing’s chronic disregard for the law, but to be able to disseminate the truth at will. The same should apply to all competitors or adversaries and likely adversaries.

⁷ The point here is not to turn our military into another intelligence service, but to expand our knowledge, understanding, and ‘feel’ for what is going on elsewhere.

⁸ Discussed at length in my “Military advising – in light of the last two decades,” unpublished ms., 2019.

⁹ Think: Vietnam (France, the U.S., China); Afghanistan (the USSR, the U.S., Pakistan); Somalia (the U.S., Ethiopia, Kenya); Yemen (Egypt; Saudi Arabia) – or Libya and Syria.

¹⁰ Not in every case. But just to reemphasize: we should only engage in other people’s civil wars very carefully, very sparingly, and using only well-vetted U.S. advisors. Proxy wars should never be treated as an expedient means to an interests-based end. We also should ‘worst case’ all possible outcomes *before* we make any commitments.

¹¹ A follow-on argument to those being made here would expand on *why* moral authority will become increasingly important – and contested – in the 21st century. Not uncoincidentally, this is also why I propose ‘we’ll be us, you be you’ as a competitive strategy in the next section.

¹² Many of whom have an affiliation with TomDispatch.com and/or the recently established Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft.

¹³ That, or the thought of falling to second or third place is unimaginable. To quote Daniel Immerwahr, “Relinquishing that primacy – giving up the seat at the head of the table – is about as palatable to U.S. policymakers as defunding police departments. It’s not just that the position is unpopular among them; it’s that, until recently, it was in many circles unthinkable” (“Should America still police the world?” *The New Yorker* online, November 18, 2020).

¹⁴ As Hal Brands writes, “Russia and China are arguing that their versions of authoritarian capitalism are superior to the United States’ liberal democracy in meeting the material and spiritual needs of their respective countries...” (“The lost art of long-term competition, *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2019, p. 37). Okay – prove it! Certainly, a number of China’s admirers believe its system *is* more meritorious, or at the very least is a system that offers a lot that others can learn from (e.g. Daniel Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* [Princeton University Press, 2015]; Daniel Bell and Chenyang Li, eds., *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective* [Cambridge University Press, 2013]). Great. Let 1,000 different arrangements bloom.

¹⁵ For the broader argument about the value of adopting a global states’ rights approach, see Anna Simons, Joe McGraw, and Duane Lauchengco, *The Sovereignty Solution: A Commonsense Approach to Global Order* (Naval Institute Press, 2011).

¹⁶ The same would hold for all countries. For instance, take India, the topic of a new book, *Making India Great*. According to reviewer Tunku Varadarajan, the book’s author notes that: “Countries that seek to become great powers...tend to ‘build their military strength and seek to project their defence capabilities aggressively.’ India, by contrast, ‘is an enigma’: For most Indians, the country’s claim to a seat at the global high table, ‘comes from its unique civilization, its democracy and pluralism, its soft power... and, only reluctantly, its military capabilities’” (“Tunku Varadarajan, “Rising Expectations,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 7, 2020).

¹⁷ “It is because no country can hope to be, over the long run, much more to others than it is to itself that we have a moral duty to put our own house in order, if we are to take our proper part in the affairs of the rest of the world” (George Kennan, *Around the Cragged Hill: A Personal and Political Philosophy* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1993).

¹⁸ As Michael Mann puts it, “... liberal and social democracy remain the least bad political systems we know. Since they are always imperfect, struggles to defend and improve them are also never-ending” (*Sources of Social Power*, p. 419). Ergo the never-ending usefulness of ‘we’ll be us,’ especially for those who don’t want competition to ever end.

¹⁹ The next few sentences may bring to mind hybrid war and gray zone conflict. However, whenever I read that our adversaries are purposely keeping their ‘attacks’ below a certain threshold I have to smile, as if this is some new development or discovery. H.H. Turney-High (anthropologist) introduced the concept of a ‘military horizon’ in his book *Primitive War* in 1949. In his 1971 Afterword, Turney-High specifically addressed guerrilla warfare. I first borrowed Turney-High’s concept of a military horizon almost 30 years ago; by hovering just beneath the horizon, guerrillas, insurgents, gang members, and others do not *look* or act like a regular military. Without a legible, visible C2 structure they flummox modern militaries and have always posed a challenge for Western forces.

²⁰ For another example of what has diminished the U.S.’s image, consider the headline, “Koreans believed America was exceptional. Then Covid happened,” *Politico Magazine*, December 2, 2020.

²¹ For instance, microwaves might be beamed at U.S. diplomats in order to make them ill. Or packets of seeds might be randomly mailed to Americans who, if they plant them, risk inadvertently introducing damaging invasive species. A list of additional hybrid warfare actions already purportedly undertaken by the Chinese can be found online: e.g. Ron Schwery’s “Non-Kinetic Warfare and China,” October 20, 2020 posted to <https://www.cognitivewarriorproject.com/presentations-documentaries/non-kinetic-warfare-and-china/>.