

ACCOMMODATION: AN UNDERUTILIZED STRATEGY FOR GREAT-POWER RIVALS

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KEY POINTS

1. Accommodation—making concessions to rival powers in order to avoid conflict—is an underappreciated great-power strategy, not the strategic folly that generations of U.S. decisionmakers have made it out to be.
2. The strategy is particularly attractive when the issue at stake is of vital concern to the adversary but only limited strategic significance for the United States, and when there is good reason to expect the adversary's aims to be limited rather than broadly expansionist.
3. On Taiwan, China's interests are vital and its ambitions unlikely to extend beyond the island, while the United States has no vital interests at stake that would justify the risk of a great-power war. Accommodation is therefore the strategically prudent course.
4. On Ukraine, Russia's overwhelming stake in the war's outcome contrasts with the absence of any vital U.S. interest. Russian ambitions are also specific to Ukraine rather than indicative of a broader agenda of territorial aggrandizement. Here, too, accommodation best serves U.S. interests.
5. On both Taiwan and Ukraine, the United States should accommodate the core demands of its adversaries, reducing the risk of a great-power conflict without undermining critical U.S. interests and paving the way for more stable long-term relationships.

A TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN?

When President Donald Trump embarked on his trip to China for a summit with Xi Jinping in May 2026, many had high hopes for the high-stakes meeting. The great-power relationship between the U.S. and China had become increasingly confrontational in recent years and was in need of greater strategic stability.¹

Yet instead of the meaningful advances Trump and Xi made toward repairing the U.S.-China relationship, the main talking point quickly became Trump's position on the issue of Taiwan.² Immediately following the summit, Trump explicitly warned Taipei that he was “not looking to have somebody go independent.” He further stressed his desire to avoid a conflict over the island, stating that “we're supposed to travel 9,500 miles to fight a war. I'm not looking for that.”³ He remained intentionally ambiguous about whether he would approve a \$14 billion arms sale to Taiwan that Congress had approved in January 2026.⁴

Trump's stance on Taiwan evoked critical responses from policymakers and pundits across the political spectrum. Some drew a comparison to British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's policy of appeasement toward Nazi Germany in the 1930s. One commentator stated that “Trump shows signs of appeasement to Beijing on Taiwan.”⁵

This was not the first time such comparisons were made in response to Trump's willingness to break with the U.S. foreign policy consensus. His determination to reach a negotiated end to the Russo-Ukrainian War, pushing for a peace deal that would likely require Ukraine to cede part of its territory and abandon any aspiration for future NATO membership, met similar criticism.⁶ In his first interview after leaving the White House, Joe Biden called the new administration's Ukraine policy "modern-day appeasement." Another observer warned that Trump would be "remembered as the Neville Chamberlain of the 21st century."⁷

The underlying assumption of Trump's critics on Taiwan and Ukraine—that accommodating rival great powers through concessions or compromises in order to avoid conflict is foolish—has long permeated the U.S. foreign policy establishment. That accommodation is tantamount to strategic folly is widely viewed as a truism informed by historical knowledge and strategic realities.

This conventional wisdom is mistaken. Accommodation is an important strategy in a great power's toolkit and can be a prudent choice under the right circumstances. Trump's instincts are right: on both Taiwan and Ukraine, the United States has strong incentives to engage in some form of accommodation toward China and Russia, respectively, rather than adopting outright confrontational policies. In both cases, the interests at stake are asymmetric—vital for the adversary, limited for the United States—and neither China nor Russia is likely to harbor broadly expansionist ambitions beyond the issue at hand.

HOW U.S. DECISIONMAKERS REJECTED ACCOMMODATION

The belief that a strategy of accommodation—making concessions to rival powers in order to avoid a conflict with them—amounts to strategic folly has a long and storied history, especially among those tasked with shaping U.S. foreign policy.

The classic historical case is that of interwar Britain and its attempt to appease Nazi Germany. Confronting Hitler, who soon after his rise to power began revising the status quo in Europe—remilitarizing the Rhineland in 1936, completing the *Anschluss* with Austria in March 1938, and thereafter making demands for Czechoslovakian territory—British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain concluded that his nation's interests would be best served by avoiding another great-power war. He sought a diplomatic solution to the Czechoslovakian crisis in the form of the infamous Munich Agreement that gave Hitler the Sudetenland. In return, the German dictator promised Chamberlain that their two nations would never go to war with one another again.⁸

Mere months later, however, Hitler invaded and occupied the remainder of Czechoslovakia, and in September 1939 attacked Poland. This historical example explains why any policy entailing the accommodation of a peer competitor immediately draws comparisons to Munich and unrelenting accusations of strategic naivete.⁹

Especially among U.S. policymakers, the purported "lessons of Munich" have long influenced strategic decisionmaking. As Henry Kissinger noted during his time as secretary of state, "for a generation after World War II, statesmen and nations were traumatized by the experience of Munich," which "was and remains a crucial lesson."¹⁰



That “lesson” featured prominently in Harry Truman’s decision to join the Korean War as well as Lyndon B. Johnson’s decision to officially deploy U.S. troops to fight in Vietnam.¹¹ The emerging interpretation of containment as requiring decisive opposition to Soviet expansion anywhere in the world reflected the same idea: give them an inch and they will take the whole world.¹²

The collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent U.S. experience during the unipolar era further enshrined the anti-accommodation consensus. Given how decisively the United States had won the Cold War, it seemed logical to conclude that U.S. officials’ conscious rejection of accommodative policies towards the Soviets had been the right call.

At the same time, the fact that the United States no longer faced any peer competitors served to preclude the matter from being revisited. After all, why would the most powerful state in modern history consider accommodating other actors on the international stage? Those who opposed the unipole’s demands were forced to comply, and its vast power advantage meant the costs of military victory remained comparatively low.

In retrospect, it has become clear that, even during the height of the unipolar moment, opting for confrontation and military force as a default wasn’t the right approach. While battlefield victories came quickly, strategic success proved much more elusive, and the staggering costs the United States incurred from its military interventions far exceeded the limited U.S. interests at stake.¹³

Now that the United States once again confronts adversaries with the ability to put up a serious fight, it is all the more important that U.S. leaders critically interrogate their principled opposition to accommodation.¹⁴

WHY ACCOMMODATION CAN BE PRUDENT

The anti-accommodation consensus is a classic example of how decisionmakers are prone to misuse history and, based on faulty analogies, arrive at policy recommendations that do not withstand proper scrutiny.¹⁵ A sober look at how the world of great-power politics works reveals that accommodation can be a highly effective tool for the pursuit of national security interests. The real strategic folly would be to categorically exclude the possibility of ever making concessions to rival states.

First, the conclusion that “appeasing” a revisionist state by giving in to its demands is doomed to fail rests on the assumption that said state has expansionist aims that go well beyond the crisis at hand. The assumption is that one is always dealing with another Nazi Germany that will utilize whatever small gains it makes for further expansion, with the ultimate goal being regional, if not global, dominance.

In fact, few states have ever, or will ever, exhibit the same relentless drive for territorial aggrandizement as Hitler’s Germany, which was under the control of a uniquely megalomaniacal and delusional leader.¹⁶ States’ primary goal is to survive, which requires them to ensure they retain capabilities on par with, but not above, those of their rivals.¹⁷ Pursuing excessive power, especially through forceful means, typically backfires: in response, other states form coalitions to confront the state that upsets the balance of power and constitutes a common threat.¹⁸ Not coincidentally, Hitler’s push for hegemony over Europe ended in an unmitigated strategic disaster.¹⁹

Moreover, the idea of cumulative gains, or that initial territorial acquisitions enable and incentivize further conquest, does not withstand scrutiny. It is intuitively appealing to think that, in Churchill’s phrasing, a rival’s



“appetite may grow with eating,” but it is not an accurate description of strategic reality.²⁰ The logic of cumulative gains constitutes a “myth of empire” that leads states to expand imprudently and undermine their own security.²¹

Modern developments, including the increasing strength of nationalism and the shift to knowledge-based economies, have made it much harder to reap the benefits of conquest, rendering the myth even more dubious.²² Russia’s failure to translate its invasion of Ukraine into significant gains serves as a cautionary tale.²³

To be clear, this does not mean that there will never again be another state hell-bent on subduing its rivals and conquering its own region of the world, regardless of how irrational such a quest might be. It does mean, however, that the chances of a U.S. adversary harboring such ambitions are exceedingly slim. Most adversaries will be committed to the status quo, or harbor only limited revisionist aims resulting from narrowly defined grievances or strategic exigencies.²⁴

Far from doomed to fail, it is thus very possible that accommodation can achieve its central goal of avoiding a great-power conflict.²⁵ If there’s a single issue over which an adversary seeks to upset the status quo, compromising on it can satisfy the rival’s ambition, remove a potential flashpoint, and clear the way for peaceful coexistence.

Of course, there is never any guarantee that the adversary’s ambitions are truly limited, or that they will not expand over time.²⁶ But given that broadly expansionist aims are the exception rather than the rule, accommodation can be the right strategic response even in the face of residual uncertainty. The certain costs of confronting an adversary, up to and including the risk of escalation into a major war, often outweigh the risks of the adversary pursuing further revisionism down the line.²⁷

Second, accommodation is particularly attractive when the issue at stake is one of vital interest to the adversary but lesser strategic significance for the United States. Cases involving such asymmetric interests are common in international politics. For instance, although Central America lacks significant strategic value for most states around the world, the United States has to monitor developments in the region closely, simply because of its geographic proximity.

Not coincidentally, great powers in the past have frequently recognized their peers’ interests in their own backyards as part of their spheres of influence. European great powers’ acceptance of U.S. predominance in the Western Hemisphere under the Monroe Doctrine serves as a telling example.²⁸

In cases like this, the United States stands to benefit little from taking a tough stance. After all, the issue at stake is of only limited strategic import, meaning that securing a favorable resolution is not required to safeguard U.S. security. Moreover, the expected costs of a confrontation are particularly high under these circumstances. An adversary that considers a vital interest to be threatened will be willing to bear tremendous costs to secure it. Opting for a confrontational stance that might escalate into conflict thus becomes particularly costly.²⁹

In fact, the balance of resolve in these situations (the adversary’s being particularly high, the United States’ limited) means the alternative to accommodation is rarely effective. After all, adopting a confrontational attitude to deter the adversary from aggression only works if said adversary perceives the deterrent threat as credible.³⁰ And given that U.S. stakes are limited, the adversary will conclude that Washington will back down rather than risk the costs of a sustained conflict.³¹ Confrontation is therefore doubly counterproductive when asymmetric interests are involved: it is particularly costly and likely to fail.



Finally, policymakers and pundits frequently understate the benefits of accommodation. Beyond its key purpose of avoiding a crisis or conflict with a great-power adversary, making concessions on issues another state greatly cares about can generate goodwill, laying the groundwork for reciprocated restraint and perhaps even genuine cooperation in the future.³² It also frees up diplomatic space to work together on issues that otherwise might have been crowded out by the more salient flashpoint. Adopting a policy of accommodation can empower moderate factions within the adversary's domestic political system while undermining hardliners' efforts to paint the United States as an enemy.³³

Think, for instance, of John F. Kennedy's decision to announce, mere months after the Cuban Missile Crisis, that the United States would stop conducting nuclear tests in the atmosphere as long as other states refrained from doing so. His speech made a great impression on Nikita Khrushchev and paved the way for superpower cooperation. Ten days later, Washington and Moscow agreed to establish a crisis hotline, and soon thereafter they signed the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. Some observers predictably criticized Kennedy's speech as an "appeasement cue."³⁴ In fact, the accommodative gesture was exactly the right course of action.

U.S. decisionmakers would do well to unlearn the fallacious "lessons of Munich" that have led them to deem accommodation an unacceptable strategy. When the United States' stake in a disputed issue is lower than its adversary's and there is good reason to believe that the adversary's aims are genuinely limited, accommodation is often the right strategic call. It promises to not only defuse the risk of great-power conflict but also set the stage for mutual restraint and cooperation.

As it turns out, these conditions are met in each of the two cases where President Trump has signaled his willingness to break with the foreign policy establishment and consider accommodation: Taiwan and Ukraine.

ACCOMMODATING CHINA ON TAIWAN

Taiwan is widely perceived as the single most dangerous flashpoint in the relationship between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC). The PRC considers the island part of its national territory, does not recognize the Republic of China or its government as legitimate, and appears poised to do whatever is necessary, including use military force, to reclaim it.³⁵

On the other side of the Pacific, the United States officially adopted a "One China policy" in the 1970s, formally recognizing the PRC as the only legal government of China and acknowledging, although not explicitly endorsing, the idea that there is only one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. This was, in essence, an accommodative policy, signaling to Beijing general U.S. support for its view on cross-strait relations.

Around the same time, Congress also passed the Taiwan Relations Act, committing to provide the island with defensive arms though not binding the United States to come to Taiwan's aid in the case of an invasion. Overall, the official U.S. position became one of strategic ambiguity under which Washington avoided definitively stating whether or not the United States would defend Taiwan.³⁶

While official policy has not changed in the decades since, officials in Washington have moved toward a less ambiguous and more confrontational attitude over Taiwan. Today, many seem to strongly favor an increase



in U.S. support, up to and including a commitment to protect Taiwan in the case of a Chinese invasion. As a case in point, during his time in office, President Biden signaled the de facto end of strategic ambiguity.³⁷

While the first Trump administration sent relatively mixed signals, the president is now moving away from the approach of his predecessor. Trump's focus is on lessening the likelihood of military confrontation between the U.S. and China, leading him to not only re-embrace strategic ambiguity but consider accommodative policies that go well beyond the One China policy.³⁸

Contrary to the frantic outcries of his critics, Trump's instincts on this issue are right. Reversing the perilous trend toward ensuring Taiwan's security, and revising U.S. official policy to further accommodate China on Taiwan, is the strategically prudent thing to do.

The dispute involves exactly the kind of asymmetric interests that make accommodation particularly attractive. There is no doubt that China considers Taiwan a vital interest and is willing to bear tremendous costs if necessary to secure control of the island. Part of the story is straightforward geopolitics. Located right off the coast of the Chinese mainland, acquiring the island would greatly enhance China's ability to protect itself by denying any adversary the use of Taiwan as a base for attacks.³⁹ As long as the island remains independent or, even worse, allied with a key adversary, it represents a source of acute insecurity for Beijing. As the centerpiece of the first island chain, China also requires Taiwan for unhindered access to the western Pacific and the economic and strategic interests it contains.⁴⁰

In addition, there are strong ideological reasons for why Taiwan is immensely important to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As a central part of its founding myth and self-understanding, the CCP views itself as redressing the injustices imposed on China during the "Century of Humiliation," when it was forced to cede territory and autonomy to foreign powers. Reclaiming Taiwan would be a milestone achievement on this quest.

The CCP has always considered itself the sole legitimate government of all China. This stance precludes recognizing the government in Taipei, established after the Nationalists' defeat in the Chinese Civil War. The implication is straightforward: the CCP regards Taiwan as an inalienable part of Chinese territory.⁴¹ For the CCP regime, its own security and legitimacy are thus closely intertwined with cross-strait relations.

The interests the United States has in keeping Taiwan out of the PRC's hands pale in comparison. To be sure, Taiwan has developed extensive trading relationships with the United States and occupies a central role in the market for semiconductors, with the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) producing a majority of the world's most advanced chips in its fabs.⁴² In addition, many believe there are significant moral stakes involved, that the United States has an obligation to support democratic Taiwan, both in peacetime and war, in its efforts to remain independent from Beijing.⁴³

But while these interests are not negligible, they are not vital either. Although decisionmakers in Washington have frequently blurred the distinction, not all strategic interests are truly necessary to secure America's core interests of protecting its territorial integrity, political independence, and prosperity.⁴⁴

To be clear, the economic impact of Beijing regaining control over Taiwan would be significant, particularly as it relates to semiconductor supply chains. Especially in the event of an invasion, the disruptions to chip production could damage the global economy, at least in the short term.⁴⁵ But the United States has already taken important steps to prepare for a scenario where it can no longer rely on semiconductor imports from Taiwan, including determined "reshoring" efforts to increase domestic production capacity for advanced chips via the CHIPS and Science Act.⁴⁶ Moreover, it is far from a foregone conclusion that the United States



would be cut off from TSMC's products if political conditions on the island were to change. After all, China has a strong interest in keeping the fabs running, both to meet its own domestic needs and to reap the economic benefits.

The more plausible concern is not an outright denial of exports but that China selectively withholds supplies as a source of coercive leverage. This risk is real, but one that can be addressed through careful management and reduction of U.S. dependency—which is what the United States is already doing.⁴⁷ Furthermore, China can only keep TSMC fabs running if U.S. allies such as the Netherlands and Japan, as well as the United States itself, continue to contribute the necessary resources and equipment.⁴⁸

Some warn that control of Taiwan could serve as a springboard for further Chinese aggression in East Asia. But the geography of other possible targets such as Japan or the Philippines, combined with the continued military superiority the United States enjoys in the region, would strongly deter Beijing from pursuing revisionism beyond the first island chain. As Lyle Goldstein summarizes, “if China were to conquer Taiwan, it would do little to facilitate further Chinese military expansion.”⁴⁹

Relatedly, it is far from obvious that China harbors expansive ambitions beyond Taiwan. Contrary to the assertions of many China hawks, there is little reason to think China views the acquisition of Taiwan as merely the first of many steps on its road to further territorial aggrandizement and regional hegemony. True, its intentions are uncertain, but that uncertainty should be taken seriously: while the United States cannot be fully confident in China's benign intentions, it similarly cannot be sure that China is malign.

If anything, the available evidence on China's intentions as well as the geopolitical circumstances it confronts in its region suggest that China has only limited revisionist aims. A recent study of Chinese foreign policy rhetoric found that China is likely a “status quo power” that is “more inwardly focused than externally oriented” and whose aims are decidedly “limited.” While the study's authors confirm that China cares deeply about unification with Taiwan, they find little support for the popular notion that the CCP views claiming the island “as the stepping stone to further Chinese expansionism.”⁵⁰

This is not surprising. Even if Chinese leaders, in theory, would like to expand China's influence throughout East Asia, the geopolitical environment they have to operate in renders any such ambitions futile.⁵¹ This is, in part, due to U.S. alliance commitments to various states in the region, but the strength these states themselves possess is of at least equal significance. East Asian countries have significant latent power potential and are already translating it into real capabilities.⁵² If the need arose, states like Japan could opt to acquire their own nuclear deterrents for even greater protection from external threats.⁵³ The strength of nationalistic sentiment in the region means that any threats to national sovereignty would encounter fierce resistance.⁵⁴

The fact that, first, Taiwan is of vital concern to China but involves only limited stakes for the United States and, second, China is unlikely to pursue expansion beyond the island, suggests that it would be prudent for Washington to formally abandon strategic ambiguity in favor of an accommodative policy that renounces any intention to defend Taiwan. Doing so would drastically reduce the risk of a great-power war, ease diplomatic tensions, and facilitate an improvement in U.S.-Sino relations.

Such a move toward accommodating China on Taiwan could take various forms. In its most extreme form, the United States could opt to officially end its support for Taiwan, cancel any prior plans to defend Taiwan, and, in the style of a grand bargain, elicit various concessions from China in return, including, for instance, the peaceful resolution of territorial disputes in the South China Sea.⁵⁵

However, such a drastic approach—prudent as it may be—is unlikely to find the necessary political backing in Washington. More realistically, the United States could begin changing course by adopting what Charles Glaser has called a “U.S.-supported self-defense option,” which entails trimming the U.S. commitment to Taiwan significantly.⁵⁶ In essence, the United States would abandon strategic ambiguity and clearly state that it would not intervene militarily in the case of an invasion or blockade. At the same time, it would continue to aid Taiwan in strengthening its own defensive capabilities in peacetime, including by providing military aid and assisting in the training of its forces.

Whichever form of accommodation Washington ultimately pursues will leave the United States better off than it is currently. Most officials today appear poised to resolve strategic ambiguity in favor of defending Taiwan if push came to shove, raising the risk of a devastating conventional war with the potential to escalate to the nuclear level. Given that the United States has only a limited stake in the dispute between Beijing and Taiwan, it should be an easy choice to eliminate this risk.

ACCOMMODATING RUSSIA ON UKRAINE

The outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War, which started with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, reminded policymakers that international politics is a grim and dangerous business.⁵⁷ Widely perceived as an unprovoked attempt to violently annex another sovereign state's territory, Russia's decision to invade Ukraine drew intense condemnation from across the West. President Biden quickly responded by authorizing hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid and deploying additional U.S. troops to NATO's eastern flank. During the Biden administration, U.S. aid to Kyiv continued to grow significantly, reflecting the widespread belief in Washington that ensuring Russia suffered defeat was of critical importance for the United States.⁵⁸

Upon entering office for the second time, Trump quickly revealed that on this issue, too, he had markedly different instincts than his predecessor. Instead of committing himself to aiding Ukraine for as long as it took for it to emerge victorious, he stated that his central goal was to reach a speedy, negotiated end to the war. As he proclaimed during his re-election campaign in 2024, “I think it's the U.S.'s best interest to get this war finished and just get it done, negotiate a deal.” Since then, he has largely remained consistent in his messaging on this issue.⁵⁹

In sharp contrast to his rhetoric, Trump so far has done much less than observers initially expected to end the Ukraine war, likely fearing that making major concessions to Russia would prove deeply unpopular at home and abroad. Yet the president has every reason to act on his instincts: accommodating Russia and limiting U.S. costs and escalation risks is the strategically prudent course of action.

First, as with Taiwan, the war involves precisely the kind of asymmetric interests that make accommodation attractive. As evidenced by its willingness to bear tremendous human, economic, and political costs over the last four years, Russia considers vital national interests to be at stake. Most importantly, Ukraine is located within Russia's immediate neighborhood, meaning any adverse developments there directly affect Russian security.⁶⁰

Heightening the strategic stakes is that Ukraine represents a crucial geographic buffer between the Russian homeland and NATO territory. Against this backdrop, it makes sense that before the invasion, Russian leaders repeatedly expressed their concerns about NATO's eastward expansion and the increasing political and military integration of Ukraine into the American alliance bloc.⁶¹



Moscow's view on the history of the Russo-Ukrainian relationship further raises the perceived stakes for Russian leaders. Putin has long maintained that Ukraine is not an independent nation but rather an integral part of Russian civilization. To him, the creation of Ukraine was a Bolshevik "mistake" he now seeks to rectify.⁶² These arguments have been rightly criticized as historical distortions that serve as propaganda.⁶³ Yet they reinforce that Russia will bear extraordinary costs to shape Ukraine's future.

While the stakes in Ukraine could hardly be higher for Russia, it is difficult to see how the war meaningfully threatens U.S. strategic interests. In fact, most of the arguments alleging that Ukraine is vital to the U.S. are specious.

For instance, some claim that defending Ukraine is required to protect the "rules-based order" and the peace and prosperity it has generated for the United States and its allies. But as many critics have convincingly argued, the liberal norms and institutions comprising that order only ever mattered on the margins. It was mostly U.S. power that created the conditions conducive to the security and wealth of the Western world.⁶⁴

Even if one believed in the importance of strengthening the liberal norms violated by Russia's invasion, specifically that of territorial integrity, this does not require pushing for a Ukrainian victory. Ensuring that violations of the norm are costly suffices—and Russia has already suffered great costs as a consequence of the war.⁶⁵

The claim that the United States needs to help Ukraine to victory because a failure to do so would undermine the credibility of U.S. commitments elsewhere is similarly fallacious. Scholars of international relations have shown that the credibility of deterrent threats does not depend on a state's past actions but rather the stakes involved in a given dispute.⁶⁶ What the United States does vis-à-vis Ukraine is unlikely to affect how its adversaries view the credibility of its commitments to, say, Japan or Germany.

As a fallback position, pundits now argue that Ukraine contains vital natural resources, especially critical minerals, and that securing them is worth incurring significant costs for the United States. This argument, too, does not withstand scrutiny. It remains unclear to what extent the deposits Ukraine has identified are economically recoverable, or whether they are large enough to warrant the multi-billion-dollar investments it would take to extract them.⁶⁷ All in all, any interests the United States might have in confronting Russia over Ukraine are hardly vital.

Second, as with China, there is little reason to fear that Russia will utilize a favorable settlement with Ukraine to embark on further aggression beyond its borders. While Russia's revisionist aims toward Ukraine are evident, it's hardly clear that Putin's long game is more far-reaching territorial aggrandizement.

For one thing, the central reason behind the Russian decision for war was Ukraine's increasingly tight relationship with the West and particularly the possibility of NATO forces being deployed on its territory.⁶⁸ Had it not been for this drift of Ukraine out of Russia's orbit—whether because it created strategic vulnerabilities or violated long-held ideological self-conceptions—it is unlikely the war would have occurred. In other words, the reasons for war were specific to the Ukrainian situation and do not indicate a desire for further expansion.

Russia lacks the means to go on the offensive against any other European state. After more than four years of intense warfare, its military capabilities have degraded significantly, to the point that it will take years for it to compensate for the losses it has suffered. More fundamentally, the balance of power strongly favors the



Europeans, who possess a much larger power potential than Russia and are beginning to translate it into capabilities.⁶⁹

Those who warn of Russia moving farther westward also ignore that an attack on a NATO member would involve risks of an entirely different magnitude for Moscow than any of its prior revisionist acts. Unlike Ukraine, the Baltics, the Nordics, and other plausible targets in Europe are protected by the American nuclear umbrella. A Russian attack would likely draw a much more direct and effective collective response than the invasion of Ukraine triggered.

The case for accommodation in the Russo-Ukrainian context thus rests on the same basic logic as in the Taiwan case. Russia has demonstrated its willingness to do whatever it takes to shape Ukraine's political future, while the United States has no vital interests at stake in the war's outcome. And with Russian ambitions unlikely to extend beyond Ukraine, the risks of a negotiated settlement that accommodates Russian demands are far more manageable than most commentators suggest.

In this case, too, the United States can pursue accommodation in various ways. The U.S. can use Ukraine's deep dependence on its military aid—up to and including cutting the provision of weapons systems, training, and intelligence—to push Kyiv toward a negotiated settlement, bring an end to the war, and eliminate the risks of a direct NATO-Russia confrontation. That deal should include the key concession Russia has consistently asked for: taking Ukrainian NATO membership off the table.

Any settlement will have to include a resolution regarding the territories Russia currently occupies. Since a return to pre-war boundaries is not a serious proposition given how the war has developed and is likely to continue, freezing the borders at their current lines of contact is the most plausible solution.

Finally, to provide for Ukraine's security after the war, the United States should embrace what Jennifer Kavanagh has described as an “armed nonalignment model.” This would entail Ukraine committing to permanent neutrality while relying on the further development of its own military capabilities—initially aided by Western assistance—as the primary guarantor of its security.⁷⁰

EMBRACING THE UNCOMFORTABLE

Accommodating China on Taiwan, or Russia on Ukraine, will be uncomfortable. To many, it will feel like rewarding adversaries for their immoral behavior. It will force U.S. leaders to resist their instinct to confront every challenge to the status quo with the utmost strength and resolve. They will draw accusations of being “appeasers” who do not know the basic lessons of history.

Still, a clear-eyed assessment of political reality suggests that accommodation will better serve American interests than confrontation. It is the hallmark of a realistic foreign policy to see the world as it is, not as one would like it to be, and to opt for the prudent yet uncomfortable choice when circumstances require.

No matter how unpalatable it might be to make concessions on Taiwan and Ukraine, the limited costs involved for the United States are far outweighed by the benefits of reducing the likelihood of a major war and achieving more cooperative relations at a moment when the risks of great-power conflict are reaching new heights.



ENDNOTES

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