



LITERATURE REVIEW

Dmitri Alperovitch (with Garrett Graff), *World on the Brink: How America Can Beat China in the Race for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Public Affairs, 2024), 400 pp.

Dmitri Alperovitch's *World on the Brink: How America Can Beat China in the Race for the Twenty-First Century* (co-written with Garrett Graff) makes a valuable contribution to the discussion on countering China and successfully posturing the United States to deter China's invasion of Taiwan. The book opens with a scenario of China mounting an attack on Taiwan, which the United States pledged to defend publicly on several occasions, and which is home to most of the world's advanced microchip production. Alperovitch argues that microchips are an unparalleled source of economic prosperity and growth for future economies. This makes it an imperative for the United States to prevent China's takeover of Taiwan. The best way of doing so is through posturing the United States to win what the author calls "Cold War II" and deterring China from attacking in the first place. The inspiration of the Cold War is not a coincidence, even if the authors miss an opportunity to learn lessons from policies the United States did not pursue so well, like arms control. The book discusses historical background of the U.S.-Soviet competition and U.S.-China relations, and then draws parallels to the competition between the United States and China that the United States only recently begun in earnest.

Russia and China, Alperovitch and Graff say, face difficulties in the future that will make it harder for them to compete effectively against the United States, if the United States plays its cards right. Russian and Chinese populations face significant aging and decline. Russia will have to live with the consequences of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, including sanctions, loss of military power (U.S. government officials have since stated that Russia's army is stronger today than it was at the beginning of the full-scale invasion¹), and a shrinking male population. China's population will age and generate unprecedented strain on China's spending. Its economy could face challenges stemming from debt, including on the regional level, and a shaky real estate market. China's rising bellicosity and aggressive diplomacy are already undermining its international diplomacy and incentivizing coalitions to frustrate its designs.

The authors have a unique appreciation for U.S. strengths, including upward mobility and ability to attract talented people from abroad. These strengths transcend often fierce arguments within the political system. Indeed, Alperovitch's experience as a Russian immigrant-turned-businessman in the cybersecurity field are an essential part of the story. The United States is a great place to innovate, and its rule of law ensures that an inventor will be able to enjoy the fruits of his labor, unlike in Russia or China where arbitrary rules may land an inventor in jail anytime. Enabling innovation further is a key component in the book's four-step "game plan to victory," the other three being defending innovation, saying yes to America's friends, and saying no to distractions.

¹ See for example Carla Babb, "US Air Force general: Russia military larger, better than before Ukraine invasion," *VOA*, September 17, 2024, available at <https://www.voanews.com/a/us-air-force-general-russia-military-larger-better-than-before-ukraine-invasion/7788601.html>.



Alperovitch's practical experience make his thoughts on innovation and the tech sector, particularly regarding microchips, the most compelling part of this game plan. Because the West's way of life and future economic growth depend on advanced microchips, they argue that the United States should diversify chip manufacturing away from Taiwan and reduce its dependence on critical minerals (necessary for their creation) from China.

The book is comparatively weak when it considers policy matters related to the U.S. defense budget and arms control. The authors resort to cliches, e.g., the United States spends more than the next ten countries combined. The defense budget reflects the country's global responsibilities. The United States makes most sophisticated conventional weapons in the world and pays its military personnel and civilians more than countries like China or Russia. Few would argue that the Pentagon's acquisition system needs change, yet the hard part has always been how to get there, because the process is legislated by Congress. Generic recommendations ("we will have to make tough choices" or "we need to be thoughtful about the military resources we are sending to Ukraine") are not particularly helpful and obscure the trade-offs and consequences of making one choice over another. The United States has had the luxury of some problems not being considered existential today because the nation paid attention to them and U.S. policies minimized them, often in cooperation with allies. Yet, they would rise to the top of the agenda quite rapidly should U.S. officials deprioritize them, because U.S. adversaries push where they think the United States and its allies are weak.

Similarly, the authors contend that should the United States and Russia be "unable to showcase leadership in the area of nuclear weapons arms control and adhere to their commitments to ban the testing of nuclear weapons," then "the world will become a much more dangerous place." Yet, this is just not so. U.S. nuclear weapons are not a problem to the same degree as Russia's or China's. These weapons matter because they provide the backdrop that allows countries to pursue their national interests. Consequently, they are more dangerous in hands of countries that pursue belligerent revisionist policies, such as Russia and China, than in U.S. hands. The authors are blind to the fact that adversarial countries such as Russia, China, and Iran will use arms control to restrain the United States and create advantages for themselves, just like the Soviet Union did during the Cold War. Moreover, they will disregard arms control agreements when it suits their interest without much blowback, as has repeatedly been the case with Russia. Despite these shortcomings, the book is a thoughtful and interesting contribution to the national security debate.

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Heather Williams, Reja Younis, Lachlan MacKenzie, Christopher A. Ford, Rebecca Davis Gibbons, Ankit Panda, Melanie W. Sisson, and Gregory Weaver, *Project Atom 2024: Intra-War Deterrence in a Two-Peer Environment* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, November 2024), 94 pages, available at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/project-atom-2024-intra-war-deterrence-two-peer-environment>.

Nobody can claim to have experience in how to fight a nuclear war, and yet, should that scenario ever arise, the American people will expect U.S. officials to have considered and planned for the possibility. Toward that end, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) asked five former U.S. officials to consider two scenarios involving limited adversary nuclear strikes. The participants responded to a scenario involving near simultaneous battlefield nuclear use by Russia and China and CSIS asked them to elaborate on U.S. strategic objectives, the assurance to allies, and possibly military and non-kinetic responses.

The scenario envisions potentially coordinated near-simultaneous actions by both Putin and Xi in Ukraine and Taiwan respectively. Russia strikes NATO with multiple low yield nuclear weapons while China conducts a 50 kt strike on a U.S. base in the Philippines.

Dr. Heather Williams, Ms. Reja Younis, and Mr. Lachlan MacKenzie, write a helpful introductory chapter that summarizes and analyzes each subsequent chapter, which consists of long form analysis by Dr. Christopher Ford, Dr. Rebecca Davis Gibbons, Mr. Ankit Panda, Dr. Melanie Sisson, and Mr. Gregory Weaver. Each author provides enough nuances and caveats with their analysis that any proper engagement with their arguments would require a chapter-length treatment; so, instead, this review will simply identify important themes and notable divergent opinions among the authors.

On the broad topic of a strategy for intra-war deterrence in the scenarios described above, the authors all agree on the importance of avoiding a general nuclear war when considering how the United States should respond to an adversary's limited nuclear employment. For some, this objective ultimately overrides other objectives, such as assuring allies and defeating aggression, to the point where they recommend a greatly restrained U.S. response, such as limited conventional strikes and heavy use of non-kinetic tools, such as cyber attacks—even if it means failing to achieve other objectives. For others, while avoiding a general nuclear war might be termed the “overriding” priority, they believe that objective might be better secured by a more forceful U.S. response that achieves other political and military objectives at the same time, such as large-scale conventional or limited nuclear employment. Relatedly, another dividing line between the authors is on the relative importance of addressing why deterrence failed in the first place when considering U.S. response options; for some, this is merely a consideration whereas for others it is the foundation on which they decide their response.

The authors broadly agree on the importance of assuring allies, the second major category of considerations in this report, but there are differences in the relative weight they attach to this objective and the likely difficulty of achieving it. The authors generally agree that allied reactions to a limited nuclear strike could range from an overriding concern about

avoiding escalation to a demand for retaliation, especially from the state that was the target of the initial attack. Some authors relegate allied concerns to secondary status in the face of the potential consequences of a U.S. response triggering uncontrolled escalation, whereas others see both long- and short-term allied concerns as in the realm of vital U.S. national interests, and therefore worthy of a higher priority.

In the third category of intra-war deterrence considerations, military response options, the authors' recommendations diverge most dramatically. Ford, for instance, leans toward conventional response options supplemented by non-kinetic attacks (cyber, electronic warfare), while holding the nuclear response in reserve for a second adversary nuclear attack. Gibbons and Panda recommend limited conventional strikes on the military units that launched the initial nuclear attack in order to signal non-maximalist U.S. aims. Sisson recommends continuing the ongoing conventional conflicts in both theaters and specifically avoiding any alert or posture changes to U.S. nuclear forces as a demonstration of restraint. Weaver is the only author to recommend limited nuclear responses in both scenarios as a form of escalation control, while also achieving U.S. political and military objectives.

The fourth and final category of considerations in this report concerned non-kinetic response options, both military and political. Ford emphasizes cyber and electronic warfare measures that could degrade adversary forces in theater while conducting a diplomatic push on all fronts to demonstrate unity and resolve against aggression. Gibbons, Panda, and Sisson recommend cyber operations paired with diplomatic campaigns and economic sanctions to isolate Russia and China. Weaver does not discuss cyber or electronic warfare but instead focuses on information operations and economic sanctions, and their targets, as means to help the United States and allies achieve their objectives.

It is interesting to observe that among the 52 total endnotes among the authors, only around five of them directly reference U.S. government leaders or policy documents and the rest are overwhelmingly academic in character. No doubt that is due in part to the classified nature of many current U.S. government discussions of intra-war deterrence in a nuclear conflict, but there are enough declassified and unclassified documents, such as the *Nuclear Weapon Employment Strategies* of the Obama, Trump, and Biden Administrations, that the authors' relative lack of engagement with past policy is somewhat concerning. Although examining intra-war deterrence in a nuclear conflict is a theoretical exercise thankfully, the chapters would have benefitted from a better grounding in Cold War policy considerations by engaging with NSSM-169 (the "Foster Panel"), the 1978 Nuclear Targeting Policy Review ("Sloss Report"), and President Carter's PD-59, to name a few.

Overall, this report is a valuable contribution to the fairly sparse, but slowly growing, think tank literature on intra-war deterrence.² Nuclear deterrence is only just now receiving the attention it deserves in this threat environment from government and non-government officials, but intra-war nuclear deterrence still remains criminally understudied in the post-

² For my own contribution to this literature, see, Matthew R. Costlow, *Restraints at the Nuclear Brink: Factors in Keeping War Limited* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute for Public Policy, July 2023), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/OP-Vol.-3-No.-7.pdf>.

Cold War. This CSIS report should help drive further discussions on the topic and, one must hope, prompt U.S. officials to give the requisite attention to intra-war nuclear deterrence in their own plans and policies.

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Julia Davis, *In Their Own Words: How Russian Propagandists Reveal Putin's Intentions* (Hannover, Germany: ibidem-Verlag, 2024), 451 pp.

To understand how a country views others and what motivates a foreign leadership's behavior, it is useful to consider the statements of that country's officials and opinion leaders. Analysts and scholars seeking to understand Russia's views of the United States and the West, as well as Moscow's views of its brutal invasion of Ukraine, need look no farther than Julia Davis' impressive chronicling of statements from leading Russian commentators and officials.

In Their Own Words: How Russian Propagandists Reveal Putin's Intentions is a compilation of articles written by the author published in *The Daily Beast* and by the Center for European Policy Analysis between 2019 and 2024. They detail the views of Russian propagandists as expressed publicly in various forums and media outlets, most notably, on the popular television talk show, *Evening With Vladimir Solovyov*. The chronology provides a fascinating look at how the views of Kremlin propagandists shifted as Russia's official narratives shifted. They provide an eye-opening account of how the Russian government and its supporters in the media engage in propaganda, disinformation, and explicit threats to bolster Russia's interests at the expense of the West. Given the extensive quotations used in the book, it is worth citing a number of them here.

Russian propagandists clearly believe they are on the right side of history, that they are in a war with the West, and that the United States is a nation in decline ("a dying empire"). For example, as the director of the Center for Middle Eastern and Central Asian Studies in Moscow stated, "The United States is the enemy. It is our enemy. It is a hostile state that aims to destroy our country... We are at war!" This sentiment was reinforced by a member of the Russian Federation Council's Defense and Security Committee, who declared, "They are our enemies, 100 percent." And as Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of Russia's state-controlled *RT* and *Sputnik* media outlets proclaimed, "War [with the U.S.] is inevitable," adding, "of course it will start in Ukraine."

Indeed, it is now well known that Russia seeks to divide Americans and sow chaos in the United States in order to fracture American unity in ways that benefit Russian policy and objectives. But to hear Russian analysts openly admit this is somewhat chilling. As one put it: "...we should be influencing public opinion in America... of course!... I will cynically tell you: whatever harms them benefits us." Another commented, "With America, we should be working to amplify the divisions and... to deepen the polarization of American society."

Russian media often portray developments in the United States in the worst possible light, suggesting that American society is in a state of decay. And the propagandists who peddle such commentaries understand that exploiting internal domestic divisions within the United States is a valuable tactic in the war of ideas. As one analyst stated on Russian television, "If we say this is war, then using the analogies of WWII... we need to work behind enemy lines, where they least expect us." As for its perceived effectiveness, as a member of Russia's parliament put it, "There isn't a single country in the world that is as easily manipulated as America."

Foreign policy is also seen as a zero-sum game, where America's failures equate to Russia's successes. As Davis recounts, Russian propagandists trumpeted the disastrous American withdrawal from Afghanistan as "beneficial for us" and evidence that "America no longer matters." As one Russian defense official put it, "American greatness is over... Russia's hands are untied to do whatever is necessary."

Russian propaganda about Ukraine has also been a staple of the average citizen's disinformation diet. Statements by Russian media commentators that Russia should use nuclear weapons in Ukraine or against the United States for supporting Ukraine have been commonplace, with one TV commentator warning that "Russia is the only country in the world that is realistically capable of turning the United States into radioactive ash." Ukraine, he argued, "poses an existential threat to Russia" that is "a matter of life and death." Similar language was used by Putin himself to defend Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and his nuclear threats have been played up by Russian propagandists. As a Duma deputy declared, "Nuclear mushroom may rise over Ukraine, but the NATO flag may not." And Russia's leading talk show host, Vladimir Solovyov, has repeatedly agitated for the use of nuclear weapons against the West, asking "why the heck do we have a stockpile of tactical and strategic nuclear weapons? To be afraid to use it?... I believe that the use of tactical nuclear weapons is unavoidable."

In addition, Russian state media and commentators parroted Putin's baseless assertions that Ukraine was committing "genocide" against its Russian-speaking population, that it needed to be "denazified," and that Kyiv (and the United States and NATO) were responsible for starting the war. When the Russian invasion began, RT's editor-in-chief described her "overwhelming sense of euphoria," stating, "I've been waiting 8 years for this... It finally happened. This is true happiness." And a military expert openly declared, "It's time for militarily coercive diplomacy on the part of Russia." Propagandists have also opined about a post-Ukraine change to Europe's borders. As Solovyov stated, "I don't think that the European borders in their current configuration will continue to exist much longer."

Clearly, there is a symbiotic relationship between Putin's positions and the public statements of his propagandists, lending credence to the subtitle of Davis' book. She notes that "Russian state media remains an extremely good predictor of what the Kremlin really intends." For example, she notes that in August 2022, Solovyov opined that North Korean troops should join Russian forces fighting in Ukraine. And in fact, this has occurred, with thousands of North Korean troops now fighting (and dying) on the front lines in Ukraine. As

Davis notes, “Putin’s propagandists... articulate the ideas contemplated by the regime they serve, with whom they socialize, and from whom they take orders.”

In Their Own Words is a rich smorgasbord of eyebrow-raising quotes that would be unimaginable if spoken by Western analysts, commentators, or government officials. Even American efforts to lower the temperature in U.S.-Russian relations and find areas of peaceful cooperation are treated with disdain and as a sign of weakness. As one Moscow State University dean openly declared, “Nothing in the history of the world ever happens without military force... Pacifists don’t determine world politics.”

While the book provides a fascinating account of the propagandistic statements and disinformation used by Russian commentators, it is more a journalistic than an academic account—to wit, the collection of published articles contains no footnotes or citations referencing any of the extensively quoted material. For research purposes, citing sources for some of the quotations, such as from *TASS* or *Izvestiya*, might have provided a more scholarly rendering. But if the reader wants to find the exact source of a quotation the author cites, it will likely be futile given the difficulty of finding online translations of Russian TV shows. (One can only reminisce over the CIA’s long-defunct Foreign Broadcast Information Service and its extensive translations of foreign media broadcasts.) Thankfully, Davis’ fluency in Russian and her expertise in monitoring what is broadcast on Russia’s state-controlled airwaves provide readers with the perspective of Russian propagandists “in their own words” otherwise unavailable to Western audiences.

In addition, the author’s anti-Trump biases and antipathy toward conservative U.S. media outlets like Fox News are evident throughout the various articles included in this compendium. For example, she writes that Fox News’ “messaging during the Trump years became almost indiscernible from Kremlin-controlled state media outlets.” In addition, her commentaries include statements that “Trump is essentially fulfilling Putin’s wishes,” that he is “the Kremlin’s unlikely comrade at the White House,” and that Russian propagandists exploit his “rabidly anti-American statements and false claims.”

There is no doubt that any statements by the president that are perceived as what Davis calls “subservience to Putin” or supportive of Moscow’s position regarding Ukraine are gleefully exploited by Russia to bolster their own narrative and foster domestic dissent in the United States. Yet, despite the repeated concerns by some, including Davis, that Trump is playing into Putin’s hand, some of the harshest and most sweeping sanctions were placed on Russia by President Trump during his first term, including tightening export controls; targeting and freezing the financial assets of Russian entities, oligarchs, and officials; expelling dozens of Russian intelligence officers operating under diplomatic cover; and closing the Russian consulate in Seattle.

At times it is difficult to know who the author blames more for the sad state of affairs she chronicles—Russian propagandists or Donald Trump. For instance, she notes that “Russian propagandists find comfort in knowing that their favorite U.S. president’s divisive rhetoric and deliberate disinformation have inflicted lasting damage on America—and cast a dark shadow in democracy, which used to be an example for other countries.” Indeed, Donald Trump’s reelection to the presidency in 2024 has been seen by many in Moscow as a

favorable turn of events. It remains to be seen, however, whether their hopes will be confirmed or dashed.

Nevertheless, the outrageous statements and quotations Davis highlights in her book provide sobering insight into the minds of Russian officials and those who seek to advance Russian interests at the expense of the United States and its Western allies. While some may see this as nothing more than propaganda intended for internal Russian audiences, the brazenness of the commentaries chronicled by Davis provides an important window into the thinking of the Russian leadership and should not be discounted or summarily dismissed by U.S. policy makers. The stakes are simply too great.

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