

The World's Great Powers Are Learning They Have Limits

di Yaroslav Trofimov

Great powers, it turns out, don't have as much power as they thought.

After taking office last year, President Trump unapologetically pushed a might-makes-right vision to remake the international order around a U.S. sphere of influence, a worldview [not that dissimilar](#) from [Russia's](#) or China's. The future seemed shaped by an oft-repeated line from ancient Greek historian Thucydides: "The strong do what they will, and the weak suffer as they must."

The saying, originally uttered by invading Athenian forces to the doomed islanders of Melos in 416 B.C., featured prominently in Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's speech that sent ripples through the international conference in Davos in January, at the peak of Europe's spat with Trump over his plans to seize the Danish island of Greenland.

Yet now it seems that the weak aren't as weak as many had believed. The strong can't really do what they want, either.

Despite spending a significant part of its long-range munitions and killing a large part of the Iranian leadership, the U.S. military hasn't been able to secure a strategic victory over a middle power such as Iran. Tehran continues blockading the Strait of Hormuz. Its theocratic system is still in solid control and maintains the ability to lob missiles at Israel and Gulf states, with the latest [exchange of salvos](#) this week.

[Ukraine](#) hasn't crumbled, either. Trump cut off American aid more than a year ago and put a diplomatic squeeze on Kyiv to surrender its eastern region of Donetsk, as part of his understanding with Russia at August's summit in Alaska. Despite that, Ukraine has managed to [turn the tide of the war](#) against Russia, holding the front line and inflicting increasingly painful strikes on the Russian heartland.

These developments showed how much technological advances—such as drones and much cheaper precision missiles—have leveled the playing field between the smaller states and the great powers that are spending hundreds of billions of dollars on their armed forces. “Ukraine is on a much more solid footing because of the technological superiority that they’ve got,” noted Latvian Foreign Minister Baiba Braže. This narrowing of the power gap worldwide has limited what military might alone can achieve. China is watching these trends closely as it contemplates whether it could, or should, seize Taiwan.

The conflicts raging around the world are, of course, different in many respects. Ukraine is a democracy waging a war of self-defense against an unprovoked Russian invasion. Iran’s repressive regime killed thousands of its own citizens before the U.S. and Israel started the bombing in February, and it has for decades supported militant proxy groups that destabilize the Middle East.

Yet, all these wars carry a similar lesson, Italian Defense Minister Guido Crosetto said in an interview. “The kind of war to which we were used, the kind of war that Russia had in mind in Ukraine—to invade and occupy a nation—is no longer conceivable,” he said. “Wars run as long as a nation has the resilience and a will to resist. Conquering a nation when its citizens are ready to fight is impossible even when there is disparity in strength, as there was between Russia and Ukraine, or even more so between the U.S. and Iran. It’s hard even for Israel, which hasn’t yet been successful against Hamas in what is practically just one city.”

Regime change—Russia’s goal in Ukraine, and, initially at least, America’s in Iran—can no longer be achieved just by the force of arms in the modern world, agreed Gen. Onno Eichelsheim, the Netherlands’ chief of defense.

“It is almost impossible to conquer such nations with all the capability that you have, be it the U.S. against Iran or Russia against Ukraine,” Eichelsheim said. “And if you don’t succeed within the first two weeks, then you end up in a stalemate position, which is very hard to break through. If you want to achieve something, you have to achieve it very, very fast.”

The limits of great-power capabilities aren't new. Both Washington and Moscow were humbled in foreign wars in the past. The U.S. had to retreat from Vietnam. Both were eventually defeated in Afghanistan. The U.S. record with the occupation of Iraq is mixed at best.

Yet, in these cases, the great powers had to give up because of protracted, painful insurgencies that followed conventional military victories and eventually sapped domestic support for war. That is no longer the case. Russian tanks have been unable to reach Kyiv in more than four years of war, and Russian advances on the battlefield have all but stopped. The U.S. didn't even attempt ground operations in Iran, knowing full well just how many American casualties that would incur.

With the [drone warfare revolution](#) that has been spurred by the conflict between Russia and Ukraine and Iran's ability to develop a vast arsenal of precise long-range ballistic missiles, the enormous advantage of the U.S. military in air power and intelligence and reconnaissance has been partially offset. This has made unthinkable a conventional armored thrust to Tehran, along the lines of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. The swift removal of Venezuela's strongman Nicolás Maduro in January—which seemed at the time like a precursor of things to come, whetting Trump's appetite for Greenland and Iran—now appears as a rare exception rather than a harbinger of the future exercise of American might.

China is paying a great deal of attention to all this. "Before the war in Ukraine, people believed that Russia is the world's second-strongest military. Now the strongest and the second-strongest militaries are all involved in wars, and these wars aren't going that smoothly," said retired Senior Col. Zhou Bo, a former director at the Center for Security Cooperation in China's Ministry of Defense who is now a senior fellow at Beijing's Tsinghua University.

China's main takeaway should be to invite Russian experts to share their skills in modern drone warfare, he added: "China is the largest producer of drones, but we don't know how to use them, militarily, really. It's only these countries that have used drones in the battlefield that can tell you how effective they really are."

The Thucydides phrase, which has long been an axiom of the so-called realist school of international relations, is an expression of crude fatalism rather than a guide to the world's much more complicated reality, said Singaporean academic Bilahari Kausikan, who served as the island nation's ambassador to the United Nations. If it were true, he quipped, a small country like Singapore would have been swallowed by its neighbors a long time ago.

"All countries do have agency, even if they are in dire circumstances. But whether you have the wit to recognize your agency and the capability to exercise it, these are different matters," Kausikan said.

Unlike Ukraine and Iran, he noted, Taiwan might not have the will to exercise that agency because China is increasingly successful in sapping the population's determination to resist a possible future Chinese military operation. Rejecting the government's rearmament proposal, Taiwan's opposition-dominated parliament in May passed a much smaller \$25 billion special military spending package that cut, among other things, funding for domestically designed drone and asymmetric-warfare capabilities. The new leader of the opposition, Cheng Li-wun, has visited Chinese leader Xi Jinping and adopted a much more conciliatory position toward Beijing.

"I tell my Taiwanese friends—without much success—that you have gotten the wrong lesson from Ukraine," Kausikan said. "The lesson is not that democracies help other democracies. The lesson is that Ukrainians helped themselves, and other people were then willing to aid them."

The Philippines is also locked in a dispute with Beijing, and could face a similar problem with the determination to resist if war erupts. "Our populations have been so shielded from the reality of conflict. What is being taught is a passive Gandhi-esque culture of peace," the Philippines Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro Jr. lamented. "But in order to have that, you need to have a strong security and defense cladding to ensure a political environment that can guarantee safety of all those who want to be nonviolent."

In his Davos speech, Carney—whose country is sometimes referred to by Trump as the future 51st state—argued that the middle powers such as Canada have no choice but to cooperate with similar nations to avoid “subordination” to global hegemons. Since then, European nations, Asian democracies and Canada have all moved to strengthen military, economic and security ties—in part to offset their dependence on the U.S., and on China.

“If they are united, the middle powers can counter the great powers,” said French political scientist Nicolas Tenzer. “None of them can do it alone, but together they have ways of imposing decisions, be it militarily, or be it in terms of international law. There is a margin for action—though it doesn’t mean it will be easy.”

History is a guide to the perils of great-power hubris. Back in 416 B.C., the refusal to submit to Athens, the superpower of antiquity, ended badly for the islanders of Melos. All their men, as Thucydides has noted, were massacred, and the children and women enslaved. Yet, at the end of the day, such imperial highhandedness backfired on Athens: It lost the broader war for domination of Greece.