



PERSPECTIVES

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The Return of (Great Power) History

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The 1989 essay “The End of History,” by American political scientist Francis Fukuyama, has been both celebrated and maligned for its prediction that the future would unfold with centuries of comparative “boredom,” as the American-led international system had no viable challengers remaining. The Trump administration’s Nuclear Posture Review represents a complete repudiation of Fukuyama’s world model. But more importantly, it is the first official warning from Washington that there may be a return of great power conflicts, which were a fixture of less stable eras in modern world history. The only solution, according to the Pentagon, is to restore America’s strategic edge, which waned under the Obama administration.

The latest iteration of the Trump administration’s security doctrine is the [Nuclear Posture Review](#) (NPR). It follows the [National Defense Strategy](#) released in January and the [National Security Strategy](#) released in December. What immediately stands out in the NPR is the now consistent Department of Defense (DOD) theme of a return to great power competition.

The American political scientist Francis Fukuyama wrote, in his famous 1989 article for the *National Interest*, “The End of History,” that great power states would by-and-large drift towards Western liberal democracy in the 21st century as the foremost rival model of governance, socialism, proved to be a dud. To be sure, Fukuyama accurately predicted that “terrorism and wars of national liberation will continue to be an important item on the international agenda.” In hindsight, one might say this was a clear-eyed warning about what was to emerge as the predominant US foreign policy concern a little over a decade later. But the most important, and therefore best-publicized, argument Fukuyama made was that “large-scale conflict must involve large states still caught in the grip of history, and they are what appear to be passing from the

scene." Thus there would be no World War III, nor any return of the great power conflicts that were a fixture of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Fukuyama wrote at great length about the advantages of this post-history world. Political stability would allow, indeed encourage, nations to economically compete and therefore prosper. His prime example of that phenomenon was Japan's remarkable transformation from defeated imperial aggressor in 1945 to the world's second-largest economy in 1989.

Fukuyama's most serious concern was in fact the "boredom" that might accompany the end of history. He described this boredom as "the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands."

America was supposed to be the clearest winner of this new post-history world. Its inherent sense of exceptionalism, seemingly proven correct with the fall of the Soviet Union, would be a force of restraint in global security and a model for aspiring democracies. Decades of costly foreign intervention since the end of World War II would likely become a distant memory, reinterpreted as the ultimate sacrifice leading to the next generation of global (i.e., post-history) governance. And the nation that defeated Hitler would no longer be called forth to defend the world order against rival idealism by would-be revisionist aggressors. Indeed, it was clear in the 1990s that the Cold War world was giving way to a unipolar world in which the US had the moral compass and strategic capability to make sure that developing nations (e.g., Kosovo) could securely make the transition to democracy.

Of course, the attacks on September 11, 2001, and the coinciding years of an evolving Islamist assault on global security, shattered the comparative tranquility of the decade preceding it. Nevertheless, while history was busy re-manifesting itself in its newest iteration, the Obama administration adopted an approach to security policy that in many ways reflected the most extreme form of Fukuyama's idea of post-history "boredom."

In short, President Obama asserted that there was an "arc" to history, and that it ultimately bent towards justice in the world. Therefore, he believed America need no longer concern itself with international security. This was the driving rationale behind eight years of foreign policy that favored rapprochement with revisionist world powers rather than strategic maneuvering.

That the Obama administration believed history (and therefore the luxury of time) was ultimately on America's side is illustrated in the [2009 NPR](#): "But fundamental changes in the international security environment in recent years – including the growth of unrivaled US conventional military capabilities,

major improvements in missile defenses, and the easing of Cold War rivalries – enable us to fulfill those objectives at significantly lower nuclear force levels and reduced reliance on nuclear weapons.” In other words, boredom led to strategic complacency.

There is nothing wrong with wanting to reduce nuclear weapons in the world. Obama was hardly the first president to aspire to that lofty goal. But his administration’s emphasis on the “complete elimination of nuclear weapons” was painfully out of touch with the realities of Russia and China’s parallel advancements, not to mention the major strides to nuclearization by North Korean and Iran.

By contrast, the new NPR explicitly asserts that America is at a vital crossroads that will determine its future world standing: “This review comes at a critical moment in our nation’s history, for America confronts an international security situation that is more complex and demanding than any since the end of the Cold War. In this environment, it is not possible to delay modernization of our nuclear forces.” The basis for this assertion is that America’s nuclear capabilities have declined as China’s and Russia’s have advanced. The latter is singled out for having increased its “warhead delivery capacity.” The problem with that, as the NPR states, is that “despite our best efforts to sustain a positive relationship, Russia now perceives the United States and NATO as its principal opponent and impediment to realizing its destabilizing geopolitical goals.”

What is the main reason for the DOD’s concern with modernizing America’s nuclear doctrine? Evidently, it’s “the return to the frequent Great Power warfare of past centuries.” In the absence of American concern with great power competition, “Russia and China ... have moved in the opposite direction.” The surest sign of the DOD’s new focus on world order strategy is the fact that the words “great power” come up no fewer than 14 times in the new NPR – whereas in the 2009 NPR, the phrase is entirely absent. Thus the NPR represents a complete repudiation of the world model that Fukuyama theorized.

Nevertheless, Fukuyama was right about one thing: he unwittingly predicted the election of President Trump. His final words in the “End of History” were: “Perhaps this very prospect of centuries[!] of boredom at the end of history will serve to get history started once again.” Without a doubt, Trump is the most polarizing American president of recent history, if not all time. And his election at the hands of working class Americans in rural areas like Pennsylvania, who until recently overwhelmingly supported Democratic presidential candidates, mirrors the rise to power of other world leaders who have managed to tap into similar populist sentiments in their countries. To be sure, this new class of sometime populists represents a rejection of the fruits of post-history boredom

(e.g., the European Union, NAFTA, TPP, etc.). Therefore, their response seemingly captures what Fukuyama was describing as a possible return of history.

Of course, Fukuyama was off in his timing. History, if it ever really went away, returned in a matter of decades, not centuries. But perhaps we can take comfort in his most recent prediction, which he reluctantly made at a [talk at Stanford University](#): that Western liberal democracy will survive well into the future. Indeed, the DOD has made the survival of the current world order the most important aspect of its new mission. And like it or not, the cornerstone of that new mission depends on America's continued nuclear dominance, without which, claims the DOD, America and its allies will be woefully unprepared to meet the challenges of an emerging post-boredom world order.

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