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Play to Win: Sticking to a Playbook in the Competition with Russia

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Russia [docks a warship](#) in Havana knowing it will provoke a response from the United States. How dare they. The US Navy dispatched a destroyer to shadow the vessel; after all, the United States has the Monroe doctrine to enforce. A few weeks prior, Russia sent around [a hundred troops to Venezuela](#). This also provoked a response, albeit [rhetorical](#). Despite these US reactions, Russia continues to play strategic games.

Why did the United States respond to these actions in these ways? And what is the most appropriate response? After all, what real threat is a single ship or a company of soldiers? America, as it is said, is the leader of the free world. But what does it mean to *lead* in practice? For starters, the United States should actively work to avoid simply reacting to adversaries' actions. Then it should execute its [National Security Strategy](#).

Russia is a regional power in decline. Long gone are the days the country extended its influence over vast chunks of the world and could credibly claim to be a superpower. Sending bombers [into other nations' airspace](#) and [acting provocatively at sea](#) represents the limit of Moscow's resources. Even its annexation of Crimea and continued destabilization of eastern Ukraine is relatively low-hanging fruit. [Colonizing the uncontested arctic](#) is another small win the Kremlin can use to relive the glory days of superpower status.

How should the world respond? With respect to the United States specifically, Russian revanchism offers arguably the most significant ongoing test of US leadership in the world since the end of the Cold War. What options does the United States have to avoid appearing weak while also not allowing Russia to constantly shape environments? Is a reactive approach the best? Can the United States continue to afford small losses such as the breakaway regions in Georgia, Crimea's annexation, or continued trouble in eastern Ukraine? How best can the United States respond to Russia's hybrid warfare? Kremlin-directed actions that stay just below a threshold, or "redline," are really difficult to

generate responses to. Will creative options solve the problem? Maybe. But smart people have already determined a way to undermine Russia's objectives; America just needs to follow through with its own strategy.

America and its allies continue to [take Russia's bait](#) but lack adequate deterrent solutions. They are responsible world actors who realize escalation is the least preferable option. The world heavyweight champion has everything to lose when he steps in the ring with a challenger. The challenger has everything to gain. And yet, this is not a boxing ring. This is geopolitics. Russia will continue to use all the foreign policy tools at its disposal to act like a superpower. It doesn't have to follow the rules of the liberal world order. In fact, President Vladimir Putin is transparent about this. He claimed that "the liberal idea has become obsolete" during a recent [interview](#). This is his attempt to undermine the West. The only response to this claim should be to demonstrate what the liberal order is capable of.

The United States doesn't need creative solutions. It is the keystone of the international order it helped to create nearly seventy years ago. Ignoring its own playbook—its own strategy—will only leave it in a reactive state. The other team has this playbook and has crafted its own plays to better advance the ball. But perhaps the United States should simply double-down on its strategy.

Russia sends one hundred troops to Venezuela? The United States should turn to page fifty-one of the National Security Strategy, which describes US interests and objectives in the Western Hemisphere, and act accordingly. This might take any number of forms, including, perhaps, sending a disproportionately large contingent of US soldiers to the Colombian border for a training exercise or to support counternarcotics operations. This is in alignment with the strategy, and such an action has the added bonus of deterring future Russian action.

Russia sends a bomber into Japanese airspace? Page forty-one: "The United States supports the peaceful resolution of disputes under international law but will use all of its instruments of power to defend U.S. interests and to ensure common domains remain free." Take a stand, in line with the strategy, against Russia's incursions. Leverage all instruments of national power to make clear that the statements in the National Security Strategy are not mere platitudes. This isn't, of course, a call to simply shoot down an offending Russian aircraft, but an acknowledgement that the typical rhetorical

response and occasional escalation of sanctions are expected, and since Russia is willing and able to absorb a great deal of sanction pain to accomplish its strategic goals, their deterrent impact is broadly negligible.

Russia has become an expert at low-cost, low-risk ways to make the United States and its allies nervous. The United States must remain resolute and proactive. The United States is *the* global superpower. When its allies are added, they hold a substantial majority of the world's military strength. Why then should they chase the actions of Russia? Rival nations who want a shot at the title need to be concerned about the United States, not the inverse.

When the United States becomes reactive, it stops leading. What does leadership look like in an age of comparatively receding but still very real hegemony? It consists of assuring allies. It consists of building weapons and technology and tactics to shape future environments to its advantage. It is a daily and hourly demonstration of resolve and vigilance. The liberal world order is not obsolete. It has contributed to stability and growth unparalleled in human history. But it needs to be defended.

The United States can and should continue to foster relationships with its partners and allies so that, in the aggregate, their collective strength is not just superior to any challenge, but vastly so. Mere rhetoric and reactive responses are not enough. The United States must focus on employing regional strategies and leveraging existing resources against the challenges confronting the nation. This long-term plan will create economic and security stability if America gives it a chance.

Strategic patience is needed alongside strategic resolve. Leadership—active leadership, leadership from the front—is required. The United States must focus on our national security objectives while avoiding the distractions that arise daily, if not hourly. Doing so might cause Kremlin decision-makers to think twice before future provocative acts. Or maybe Russia will continue to play its hand while its economy falters and its people grow discontent. This is why both resolve and patience are called for. But the United States must break the cycle of reactive responses and not return to it. We can do better. A mere tie is considered a loss for the reigning world champion.

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