

Comparing today's world to the 1930s is lazy and dangerous

Michael Clarke

February 29 2024

Note: This article appeared in *World Politics Review* on February 29 2024.

A recent spate of commentary has drawn the analogy between today's regional conflicts and the regional conflicts of the 1930s that led to World War II. Those who wield these analogies often use them as cautionary tales for how to deal with contemporary international security dynamics, such as Russia's war in Ukraine, China's efforts to coerce Taiwan and Iran's use of its various proxies in the Middle East.

But in pointing to the dire consequences that followed the purported appeasement of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Imperial Japan in the 1930s, these analogies misread the past, with potentially dangerous implications for the present.

The crux of such arguments, as epitomised by [a recent article](#) by Hal Brands, is that the Axis powers that went on to trigger World War II 'began as a trio of loosely connected contests for primacy in key regions stretching from Europe to the Asia-Pacific.' Only thereafter did their efforts to dominate their own regions eventually coalesce into an overlapping challenge to the existing international order. Here, what united them was not their illiberal domestic political systems but rather their common sense of grievance against an existing global order that condemned them to a second-tier, 'have not' status in the international pecking order. Thus, over time, their shared geopolitical and ideological worldviews eventually pushed them together to present a global challenge to the existing international order.

Fast forward to 2024 and, [according to Niall Ferguson](#), 'now, as in the 1930s, a menacing authoritarian Axis has emerged.' This 21st-century 'axis' is similarly [linked](#) by 'autocratic governance and geopolitical grievance,' leading Moscow, Beijing and Tehran to try to 'break a US-led order that deprives them of the greatness they desire.'

This line of argument, however, is intellectually lazy and empirically flawed in terms of its understanding of both the history of the 1930s and the relation of that history to the present.

It is intellectually lazy as it rests on [a deterministic narrative](#) in which 'certitudes' about the decade preceding WWII 'attach themselves to each other, almost like rules of deduction' to explain the subsequent global conflagration. In this flawed narrative, authoritarian demagogues [harnessed](#) atavistic nationalism and social resentment unleashed by the Great Depression in pursuit of 'strident calls for national primacy.' Meanwhile, the established powers [dithered](#) and gave in to the temptation of seeking to buy peace through concessions to and compromises with the Axis powers.

The culmination of this narrative, and its core cautionary tale, is the ossified 'Munich analogy' that has [animated](#) much of [US foreign policy](#) since 1945 and which warns us that attempts to buy security in the

face of authoritarian adversaries will at [best](#) delay conflict while strengthening the aggressor's hand, 'causing the conflict to be fought at a later date under less favorable conditions.' The lesson that those who compare the present to the 1930s want us to learn is simple: to act now, before today's discrete regional conflicts coalesce to produce another global conflagration.

This easily understood narrative, with its comforting lesson that we only have to stand up to authoritarian revisionism and all will be well, may appeal to the [crusading](#) strain in US foreign policy thinking. But it makes for poor analysis.

Relying on 'the lessons of history,' as [Joseph Stieb](#) points out, is a 'shortcut for critical thinking' that 'loses value once you sink into specific historical contexts and appreciate their contingencies.' Worse still, doing so opens the potential for the purported lessons to be misapplied or distorted, or for them to reinforce biases.

In this case, the deterministic narrative by which the economic catastrophe of the Depression led to authoritarianism which led to aggressive revisionism ignores the complexity and contingency of the [diplomatic](#) and [strategic](#) choices the Axis and non-Axis powers made during the crises of the 1930s. Uncritically adopting this narrative commits one of the errors that, [according](#) to John Lewis Gaddis, social scientists often make in their use of history, namely to oversimplify the past in order to anticipate the future.

Similarly, the analogy between China, Russia and Iran today and the Axis powers of the 1930s does not hold up to close scrutiny.

First, the assertion that Russia, Iran and China constitute the 'have nots' of today's global order is a dubious one. Two of the three are permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, recognised nuclear weapons states under the Non-Proliferation Treaty and acknowledged by others as great powers. Granted, Russia has done much damage to its standing through its unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. However, it is an especially difficult argument to defend with regard to China, which is the second-largest economy in the world and [dominates](#) crucial supply chains. Moreover, Beijing has [become](#) an actor with global reach and influence, [recognised](#) by Washington as the United States' only peer competitor for global hegemony. In this sense, contemporary China could not be more different than the Axis powers of the 1930s.

Second, none of the members of this potential 21st-century 'axis' are bound by formal alliance agreements. Even the closest alignment among them—Moscow and Beijing's 'no limits' partnership—represents a convergence of both sides' strategic calculus rather than an 'ideological convergence,' [according to Bobo Lo](#), an expert on Sino-Russian relations. There are no mutual defense obligations and 'neither side feels inclined to act in support of the other unless it suits their direct interests,' as is clearly [borne](#) out by Beijing's approach to the war in Ukraine. As such, Lo concludes, it is 'not an alliance under any meaningful definition.'

Finally, framing this grouping as a 21st-century axis, as Daniel Drezner [argues](#), 'feeds into an American predilection for lumping all US adversaries into the same basket.' During the Cold War, the communist world was viewed as a monolithic bloc controlled from Moscow, and after 9/11 the administration of then-President George W. Bush asserted that Iran, Iraq and North Korea constituted an 'axis of evil' bent on global mayhem and mischief.

Similarly, Russia, China and Iran's domestic authoritarianism and confrontational relations with the US have now fostered the view in Washington that they share similar worldviews, interests and objectives, resulting in an increasingly binary view of a [world divided](#) between autocracies and democracies. Indeed, the [National Security Strategy](#) released in 2023 by the administration of President Joe Biden explicitly asserts that the 'most pressing strategic challenge' to the US today is posed by states such as China, Russia and Iran that 'layer authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy' seeking to 'remake the international order to create a world conducive to their highly personalised and repressive type of autocracy.'

Yet each of these actors presents separate and dissimilar challenges to the United States. In particular, China's [aggressive behaviour](#) toward Taiwan, its military buildup and its efforts to influence and shape international institutions should not be conflated with Russia's destructive actions in Ukraine and its [explicit rejection](#) of the norms of the current international order.

With respect to Taiwan, as Andrew Scobell and Lucy Stevenson-Yang [note](#), Beijing has long been convinced that Taiwan—unlike Ukraine—enjoys a US security guarantee. As such, the ‘greatest deterrence to a massive Chinese military attack on the island is Beijing’s assumption that war with Taiwan also means a war with the United States.’ This, in combination with continued [doubts](#) about the Chinese military’s ability to mount a full-scale invasion, means that Beijing’s [preferred](#) approach to attain ‘reunification’ remains through coercive options short of war. For the US, then, the objective must be to ensure that Beijing is not disabused of this assumption.

China’s efforts to shape global institutions and norms also distinguish it from Russia. Whereas Moscow has acted as a disruptor and spoiler, Beijing seeks to [portray itself](#) as offering an alternative vision of global order to that offered by the West. China’s [Global Security Initiative](#), for instance, [seeks](#) to center China’s vision of global governance on ‘basic norms of international relations based on the purposes and principles of the UN Charter’—that is, a Westphalian conception of international order based on norms of sovereignty, territorial integrity and noninterference in the domestic affairs of states, rather than the post-1945 liberal order established by the US based on free markets, democracy, the rule of law and universal human rights.

While the chances of driving a wedge between Moscow, Beijing and Tehran might be slim under the current circumstances, there is nothing beyond a coincidence of interests driving them together. So framing them as a nascent axis overlooks ‘the myriad ways that US foreign policy has thrived when it divided rather than united opposing coalitions,’ as Drezner put it.

The greatest risk of ‘1930s redux’ thesis, therefore, is to lock the US into a path-dependent approach that will miss opportunities to divide and otherwise confound opponents of US primacy. Perversely, the recipe for US success that emerges from it would magnify the incentives for Washington’s foes to cooperate and, in the process, engender a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Professor Michael Clarke is an Adjunct Professor at the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney.