

# US versus China: Promoting 'Constructive Competition' to Avoid 'Destructive Competition'

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## SMA Perspectives

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## SMA Perspectives Series

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## Executive Summary

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It is not an exaggeration to state that China is and will remain a significant challenge to the US on all aspects of national power for the foreseeable future. This situation has been in the making for quite some time. This SMA Perspectives paper will not delve into the historical roots of why the US got to where it is, however. Nor will it dwell on the purely military aspects of the conflict. These are important considerations that are amply discussed elsewhere in numerous scholarly publications. This SMA Perspectives paper is focused on the following question: "How should the US manage the US-China relations so that they stay below the level of conflict and destructive competition?" In this context, the paper distinguishes "constructive competition" from "destructive competition." It is also a follow-on to a previously published paper, entitled "Present and Future Challenges to Maintaining Balance Between Global Cooperation and Competition." The focus of the previous paper was on the conditions that encourage actors to act in ways that promote cooperation and avoid escalation to conflict. It offered a range of alternative actions that the US and/or another actor can take that will protect the vital interests of both. In the current SMA Perspectives paper, we apply this paradigm and the general insights from the previous paper to the US-China relationship specifically.

In the context of this SMA perspectives paper, "constructive competition" is a "state in which actors see their interests on a particular issue to be in some degree of non-threatening, non-damaging opposition." It is "tolerable and productive," and it is "the ideal mode in a dynamic global system, as it stimulates innovation and movement" (Astorino-Courtois, 2019; Astorino-Courtois, 2021). It assumes that the main actors can cooperate on common interests. It requires agreed upon norms or boundaries of accepted behavior and assumes that there is some degree of agreement between them. In this context, mutualism implies that both sides see the potential for gains.

"Destructive competition," on the other hand, is a "state in which actors see their interests on a particular issue to be in opposition and potentially damaging to their respective interests. Tactics consistent with destructive competition can range in severity from international rules violations (e.g., stealing intellectual property) to actions seen as sufficiently harmful to necessitate shows of armed force to signal or demonstrate willingness to escalate. Thus, it is possible for two actors to be in a state of constructive competition on some issues and in a state of destructive competition on others" (Astorino-Courtois, 2019; Astorino-Courtois, 2021). In this context, the animosity between the actors is such that they are willing to undermine themselves to take the other down. It is also possible for destructive competition to interfere with constructive competition. This occurs when two actors' interests do not align. In this

context, it is assumed that the US and China will use all forms of competition to include selective use of direct confrontation and/or conflict when a state's vital interests are at risk or perceived to be at risk.

Maintaining balance among competing interests in international security affairs is both a leadership and a management issue. Major leadership and management objectives include satisfying specific security objectives, while simultaneously 1) avoiding escalation (to the right) on the cooperation-competition-conflict continuum, 2) looking for opportunities to cooperate and compete constructively with long-time partners and competitors alike, and 3) retaining escalation control in the case of destructive competition and conflict. The ideal states are cooperation and constructive competition, given that US security objectives are met. Thus, the US objective would not necessarily be to "gain advantage," particularly where cooperation better serves overall US interests. "Gaining advantage" implies asymmetry, which in and of itself is the foundation of destabilizing escalatory security spirals. Rather, the US objective would be to defend against disadvantage and seek to "create dilemmas for the adversary," if these dilemmas would lead to cooperation or de-escalation, but not if the dilemmas would lead to destabilizing choice options. Key to all this is a viable risk management strategy.

There are wide differences in perception between the US and China (and other authoritarian governments) in terms of what is "acceptable" behavior in competition below armed conflict. Examples from China include forced technology transfer, economic and military espionage to fuel China's military advantage (i.e., military-civilian fusion), influence operations, offensive cyber operations, biological attacks, and the use of non-traditional intelligence collectors. Some of these aspects are examined in this SMA Perspectives paper.

The US perspective of this competition with China is discussed by Lt Gen (Ret) Jack Shanahan, who proposes exchanging a single-note (specifically, containment) strategy for a five "C-note" scale—cooperate, compete, contest, confront, and conflict—to enable the US to tune its policy response to specific issues, approaching each on its merits and allowing progress to be made (or not be made) independently.

China's perspective of US-China competition is discussed by four respective contributors:

- Dr. Michael D. Swaine argues that China is well aware that the US possesses huge advantages, both internal and through its allies and partners, that make conflict a risky strategy of dubious benefit.
- Dr. Scott W. Harold notes that US actions and policies have often been consistent with the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) framing of the US as a threat to China's interests and security, and this has enabled them at various times to promote a narrative that places the responsibility for regional tension and instability with "anti-China forces" within the US.
- Mr. Abraham M. Denmark notes that for China's leadership, competition with the US is not an end in itself, but rather a necessary part of their effort to build an international system in which the CCP can achieve its own interests and objectives.

- Dr. Yi Edward Yang argues that China's policies are both issue- and domain-dependent and, drawing on a broad literature, presents three models to explain various aspects of China's behavior: the Social Identity Model, the Opportunistic Multilateralism Model, and the Centrality-Heterogeneity Model.

Other aspects of the US-China rivalry are addressed by several authors throughout the course of the paper:

- Dr. Zachary S. Davis and Mr. Marshall Monroe highlight the scope and purpose of the movie and media aspects of the CCP's soft power crusade and propose several options for countering it.
- Mr. Alex Campbell and Mr. David Kirkpatrick advocate a regional cyber pact in the Indo-Pacific that suits the nature of cyber competition and builds on a unique American asset.
- Dr. Oriana Skylar Mastro states that the US must avoid relying on Cold War tools and strategies of competition. Instead, the US needs to demonstrate to its allies and partners that it can protect them not only from military attacks but against other costly behaviors that Beijing may enact against them, such as economic coercion or diplomatic isolation.
- Mr. Mark Hoffman argues that the nature of peer competition is in essence that of a complex adaptive system, and as such, insights and approaches from complexity management might be leveraged to help compensate for some of the asymmetric disadvantages endemic to the current adversarial peer competition.

Finally, in the closing chapter, Dr. Allison Astorino-Courtois attempts to bring all of the contributors' insights together to provide a deeper understanding of the complexities of competition between the US and China.

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## Introduction. A Conceptual Approach to Promote Constructive Competition With China

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### Abstract

*The predecessor to this SMA Perspectives paper argued that international security has evolved from operating in a peace-conflict continuum to one which involves balancing international relationships to operate in a continuum that varies between competition and cooperation and specifically avoids conflict, particularly in a military sense. When properly executed, the influence aspect of this strategic balance recognizes that an actor's decision calculus involves not only its perceptions of the costs and benefits of taking an action, but also the costs and benefits of not taking an action. This paper assumes that China and the US will remain strategic competitors but will avoid direct military and other forms of confrontation that endanger their well-being unless a vital national interest is threatened and will even cooperate in areas where they share common goals. This paper also distinguishes between "constructive competition" and "destructive competition." Constructive competition is a "state in which actors see their interests on a particular issue to be in opposition but not a threat." Constructive competition is "tolerable and productive," and it is "the ideal mode in a dynamic global system, as it stimulates innovation and movement" (Astorino-Courtois, 2019). Cooperation between parties, where practical, promotes constructive competition because the parties see value in using competition to benefit their goals and objectives. Destructive competition, on the other hand, is a state in which actors see their interests on a particular issue to be in opposition and potentially (or actually) a threat to their interests. When vital interests are threatened, destructive competition has the potential to escalate to direct confrontation, which, left unchecked, could further escalate to a state of conflict (Astorino-Courtois, 2019; Astorino-Courtois, 2021). Cooperation between the parties, where practical, is important to provide vehicles to control escalation and reduce the potential for confrontation. The US must demonstrate its willingness to cooperate where there are shared interests, the capability to manage escalation when countering destructive competition, and the will to win should China threaten to confront the US or escalate a confrontation to conflict.*

### Encouraging Constructive Competition to Avoid Confrontation and Conflict

In the past, the US has exercised decisive influence over its adversaries by credibly threatening to deny benefits and/or impose costs while also encouraging restraint by convincing the actor that restraint will result in an acceptable outcome (Joint Staff, 2006). Changes in the security environment, particularly with respect to China, have driven an evolution in thinking about how to deal with competitors whose differing objectives could lead to escalation from routine

competition to destructive competition and then to conflict. Destructive competition is a state in which two actors see their interests on a particular issue to be in opposition, and potentially or actually a threat, to one or both interests. There are clearly areas where US and Chinese (government) objectives overlap, however, which leads to situations where the two governments see benefit in cooperating in those selected areas, even as they compete in others (Joint Staff, 2018).

To protect both US interests and the strategic balance with Chinese government interests, the US must understand China's perception of the benefits of a Course of Action (COA), the costs of a COA, and the consequences of restraint or inaction (that is, the benefits and costs of not taking the COA in question), as well as China's risk-taking propensity relative to the consequences (costs and benefits) of the action (Figure 1). China's risk-taking propensity is important because it affects the relationship between the values and probabilities of the benefits and costs that China considers in its decision-making process. The more important an interest is to the Chinese government, the more willing it will be to accept risk.

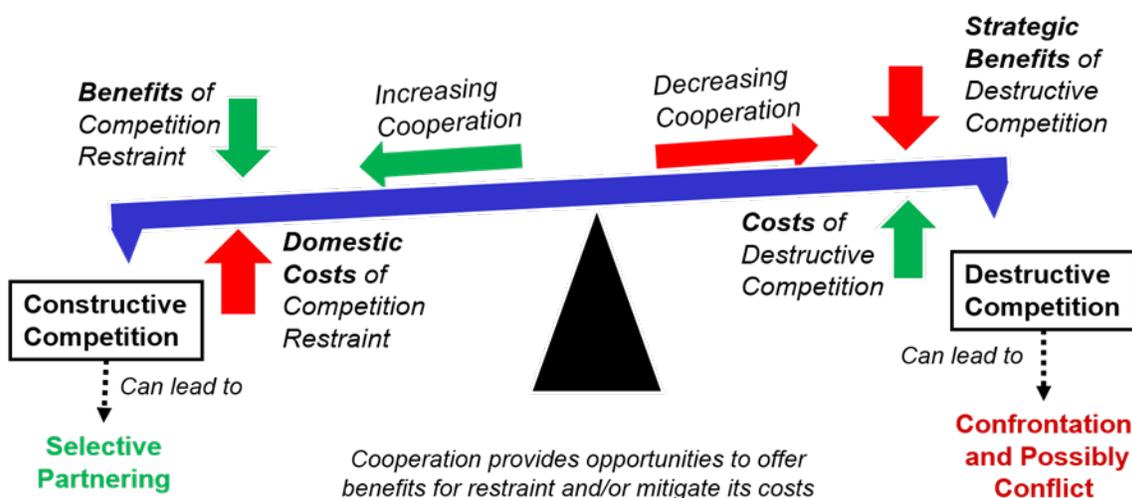


Figure 1: Strategic Competition Continuum

The US can encourage China to conduct activities that avoid escalation towards confrontation or conflict by enabling a range of alternative courses of action in which China can execute that offer the advantage of protecting the vital interests of the Chinese government, the US, and their partners. Cooperation in areas where the US and Chinese government have shared interests provide vehicles for communication that can foster "constructive competition," provide vehicles to control escalation, and reduce the potential for a rise in tensions leading to direct confrontation or even conflict. Constructive competition is a state in which actors see their interests on a particular issue to be in opposition but not a threat. Constructive competition is tolerable and productive, and it is the ideal mode in a dynamic global system, as it stimulates innovation and movement.

The Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning (JCIC) describes the competition continuum as consisting of three states of relations. The first is armed conflict, where the use of violence is the primary means by which an actor seeks to satisfy its interests. The second is competition below armed conflict, which exists when two or more actors in the international system have incompatible interests but neither seeks to escalate to armed conflict. The third is cooperation, which reflects mutually beneficial relationships between strategic actors with similar or compatible interests. The JCIC states that, “Although interests will only rarely be in complete alignment, relations that are fundamentally cooperative are strategically important for the United States because they underpin the international order, enhance collective security, help to ensure access, enable burden-sharing, and deter conflict” (Joint Staff, 2018). This SMA Perspectives paper focuses on US-China competition, specifically constructive competition—a state where the Chinese and US governments see many of their goals and objectives to be in opposition but not in ways that pose a threat to either government’s vital interests.

Trust and influence are overarching concepts in the context of maintaining a strategic balance, and trust building is a key challenge in this context. When successfully executed, the activities of the Chinese and US governments, their partners, and their surrogates are balanced so that they do not threaten the vital interests of any of the parties, even as they compete with one another. The influence aspect of strategic stability recognizes that China’s decision calculus involves not only its perceptions of the costs and benefits of taking an action, but the costs and benefits of not taking an action. This requires an understanding of Chinese intent, which reflects its short- and long-term international and domestic objectives. The intent assessment process should begin with a consideration of at least two narratives of adversary behavior: one based on a Strategic Intent Model and a second on an Internal Logic Model (Schaub, 2009).

The Strategic Intent narrative builds a case that China will act to achieve external goals. This assessment begins with a review of China’s grand strategy—the goals that its leadership has traditionally sought, the goals sought by its current leadership, the environment in which it finds itself and how it facilitates or hinders pursuit of those goals, and the capabilities it possesses to overcome these obstacles and take advantage of situations as they arise (Schaub, 2009).

The Internal Logic narrative builds a similar case to explain what China most likely intends to do, but its focus is on the internal or domestic imperatives and constraints facing the Chinese government. This assessment begins by identifying the structure of the Chinese government’s leadership, the people in these key leadership positions, and their relations with one another. It also identifies various internal constituencies the Chinese leadership is dependent upon or responsible to, in particular those in a position to undermine or reward those leaders’ behavior. Finally, it attempts to identify internal problems that Chinese leaders believe they can solve by acting externally (Schaub, 2009). Other authors in this publication will discuss China’s external goals and domestic imperatives in detail.

Developing a range of potential courses of action for the US, its partners, and its Chinese competitor to consider when international stability is disturbed, regardless of the cause, enables decision-makers to strike a balance among each of their vital objectives. Each actor must understand the costs and benefits of decisions to act, or not to act, from the perspectives of all parties, to include how these decisions may be viewed domestically. The methods to maintain strategic balance when the actors are engaged in aggressive competition can vary widely, but successful action in this state will require creativity and flexibility to accommodate a fluid political situation and pervasive information environment. To do this, the US and its partners must possess the best possible understanding of how all relevant actors, not just China, will perceive the action(s) being considered. This will require a continual reassessment of China's intentions and capabilities in recognition that just as US policy aims could change over time, Chinese government aims and thresholds are also likely to change due to changes in the international environment and/or the Chinese economic and social situation (Joint Staff, 2018).

Ensuring that US competition with China remains constructive is critical to avoiding confrontation and conflict. This demands that the US develop capabilities to successfully compete without causing unfavorable escalation. During the Cold War, deterrence was enabled by communication and negotiation, avoiding conflict, and encouraging constructive competition and cooperation. In today's environment, deterrence requires communication and negotiation with even greater granularity than in the past, given the "shades of gray" in which international political, military, economic, social, and information activities are conducted. China (and other US competitors) conduct activities characterized by ambiguous intent to confuse public opinion, paralyze political decision making, subvert legal frameworks, and avoid crossing the threshold of military response (Department of Defense, 2018).

Stability mechanisms, applicable across the competition continuum, are the primary method by which the Joint Force affects the human dimension (Joint Staff, 2011). To compete and protect US interests, the US must employ all measures—short of those that might reasonably lead to conflict—to achieve US objectives, prevent the competitor from achieving its aims, and improve the overall strategic position. Where necessary, the US must counter or contest China's actions that seek to undermine US strategic objectives affecting the United States' relative strategic position with respect to China and ensure that China is not able to achieve its own strategic and regional objectives that run counter to those of the United States'. The US should cooperate with China in ways that are consistent with US objectives and where areas of agreement exist, while also maintaining relationships and securing bilateral advantage in accord with US and partner interests (Joint Staff, 2018).

Military actions can shape favorable psychological, political, and logistical conditions in coordination and cooperation with, and in many cases in support of, non-military activities. The US will coordinate military and non-military activities to achieve advantageous psychological impact on the Chinese government, its partners and clients, and actors neutral or friendly to the US across the different conditions of the operating environment. The US



Overall, success in planning and executing a new security strategy with China will heavily depend on how well the US and its partners can address key aspects of the current national security environment, to include challenges and opportunities, which other chapters in this publication will address.

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## Chapter Summaries

### Part 1. US Perspectives

#### Chapter 1. Hitting the Right C-Notes With China: Seeking Balance Along the Scale From Cooperation Through Conflict

Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Jack Shanahan first reviews the Trump administration's approach to China—in particular, their attempts to reduce US economic vulnerability to China. He notes that their policy of decoupling was made more challenging by the “staggering complexity” of the global system, which makes the long-term effects of individual policy choices on US relative power almost impossible to forecast with any accuracy. He then moves to a discussion of the options available to the Biden administration as it seeks to define its own China policy, judging that, domestic and international constraints and pressures notwithstanding, opportunities to shape favorable US-China relations exist. While he agrees with recent scholarship that regards competition between the US and China as inevitable and conflict possible, he does not consider it inevitable. He proposes exchanging a single-note (specifically, containment) strategy for a 5 “C-note” scale—cooperate; compete; contest; confront and conflict—to enable the US to tune its policy response to specific issues, approaching each on its merits and allowing progress to be made (or not) independently. This approach, he contends, would decrease the likelihood that a stalemate on one contentious issue could prevent discussion of, or cooperation on, other issues. A concurrent emphasis on a sixth “C-note”—cognition (influence and information)—and return to closer cooperation and communication with allies and partners would strengthen the US position, making conflict a greater risk for China. Shanahan ends with the warning that the complexity of such an approach will require “sublime leadership at every level.”

### Part 2. China Perspectives

#### Chapter 2. Chinese Strategic Assessments of the United States and US-China Strategic Competition

Dr. Michael D. Swaine begins with a discussion of “The Chinese Dream”: President Xi's encapsulation of China's goal of becoming a “moderately prosperous” country by 2021 and a strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious, socialist country by 2049. He notes that while these goals depend on favorable external conditions, Xi has moved away from the low profile of Deng Xiaoping and has demonstrated greater willingness to use China's economic and military influence to shape global norms. Swaine notes that while recent US policy actions (domestic and international) have weakened American capabilities and influence, they have strengthened China's perception that the US seeks to prevent China from achieving the Chinese Dream. Not only has the US's hardline stance motivated China to reduce its economic and technological dependency on the US, it has prioritized its military modernization goals, including its cyber and space capabilities. Despite their perception that the US is in decline,

China, he argues, is well aware that the US possesses huge advantages, both internal and through its allies and partners, that make conflict a risky strategy of dubious benefit. Thus, the potential exists for making competition more constructive, if the US is less adversarial and zero-sum in its approach. In particular, Swaine notes that while Chinese and US views on global governance differ in many respects, these differences do not need to be zero-sum, and there is room for compromise. He also pushes back on the view that China is actively seeking to dominate the developing world, arguing that it is not clear that it sees preeminence as necessary for national success. There is, therefore, room for constructive US-China competition in many areas. Whether or not it is realized will depend in great part on the US's willingness to take the first steps in reducing the confrontational nature of the current relationship, while challenging Beijing to do the same, and moving more toward the positive-sum, moderate position of its allies and partners.

### Chapter 3. For China, the Cold War Never Ended

Dr. Scott W. Harold's chapter provides an overview of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) perception of and strategy toward the US, from the post-war Eisenhower–Dulles containment and "peaceful evolution" policy, to the current Biden administration's efforts to reorient US–China relations. He identifies a consistent CCP focus on protecting its domestic power and presenting the US (and the West more generally) as determined to prevent the rise of a powerful China. He notes that US actions and policies have often been consistent with the CCP's framing of the US as a threat to China's interests and security, and this has enabled them at various times to promote a narrative that places the responsibility for regional tension and instability with "anti-China forces" within the US. Even with a change of administration in the US, he does not expect a fundamental shift in CCP outlook. As long as the CCP believes the US and its allies seek to end CCP domestic control, competition "is unavoidable, existential, and perpetual and will require eternal vigilance."

### Chapter 4. Trends of the Times: Foundations of Beijing's View on Competition With the United States

Mr. Abraham M. Denmark suggests that much US analysis of China misconstrues its means with its ends, raising the risk of strategic error and unintended consequences. He argues that for China's leadership, competition with the US is not an end in itself, but rather, a necessary part of its effort to ensure an international system in which the CCP can achieve its own interests and objectives. Competition with the US is not a choice (it's not "personal") so much as it is an inevitable outcome of the presence of two major powers with conflicting national interests in the same international system. The US is only of concern to China to the extent that it proves an obstacle to China's interests. These center on building national power and the security of the CCP, ideally through deference (using economic relations to bring states into ideological alignment with China) rather than through dominance (military power and coercion). A preference for maintaining a "peace and development" approach to China's rise decreases the probability of direct conflict with the US, but if China's leadership begins to lose

confidence that this approach will continue to be effective, then significant strategic changes in its approach to the US are likely.

## Chapter 5. China's Global Governance Ambitions: Challenges and Opportunities for US–China Relations

Dr. Yi E. Yang's chapter focuses on what changes in China's approach to and relationship with the global governance system can tell us about the likely trajectory of US–China relations. He observes that Chinese leaders' rhetoric surrounding global governance has changed from Deng Xiaoping's strategy of maintaining a low profile, with Xi calling for China to play a part in leading system reform. This objective is intrinsically linked to Xi's high profile "Chinese Dream" concept of national rejuvenation and a return to great power status for China. Yang attributes China's increased assertiveness in part to the perception (among the Chinese population, as well as Chinese leadership) that the 2008-09 global financial crisis, combined with more recent domestic political changes in Britain (Brexit) and the US (2016 election), were evidence that the global balance of power had passed the inflection point, with China overtaking the US. The perception among China's political elite that the Trump administration sought to derail China's national development and rejuvenation provided additional motivation for China to push back in the global governance space. Yang cautions against characterizing China's goal as reshaping the global order in its own authoritarian image. He argues that China's policies are both issue and domain dependent and, drawing on a broad literature, presents three models to explain various aspects of China's behavior: the Social Identity Model, the Opportunistic Multilateralism Model, and the Centrality—Heterogeneity Model. Application of these, he argues, supports the view that China's approach to global governance is more nuanced than often portrayed and that, while aspects of the system pose challenges to China's interests, it has benefitted from others. Thus, its own efforts at institution building should not be dismissed out of hand. However, expecting significant change in China's strategy or goals is unrealistic; its leaders consider their actions to be justified, as they serve the long-term goal of preserving CCP rule, and preserving CCP rule is in the interests of the whole Chinese nation. Furthermore, in the wake of the Trump administration, the US-led alliance system has been significantly weakened, and policy coordination can no longer be assumed. This presents China with an unprecedented strategic opportunity to harness global governance to the Chinese dream.

## Part 3. Various Aspects of Competition With China

### Chapter 6. An Approach to Managing the "Complex Adaptive System" That Is Peer Competition

Starting from the observation that the US faces asymmetric disadvantages when competing with and engaging in non-kinetic conflict with its peer adversaries, most notably China and Russia, Mr. Mark Hoffman argues that approaches used in complexity management can provide a powerful theoretical framework for understanding addressing these asymmetries. In

particular, treating peer competition as a complex adaptive system enables us to account for the multifaceted, interdependent, and evolutionary nature of US–China and US–Russia relationships. Game theoretic approaches can then be employed to explore how the US might gain earlier and deeper understanding of how these asymmetric advantages might manifest. This understanding could then be put to use developing strategies to counter peer adversaries. Consistent with other contributors, Hoffman argues that peer competition is enduring. As such, we need to think in terms of continual engagement (game playing) and avoid being outmaneuvered in the long term, rather than seeking a definitive “win” and expecting an end to competition.

### Chapter 7. One Belt, One Movie: China’s Campaign to Cancel America’s Cultural Dominance and Assert Alternate Narratives

Dr. Zachary S. Davis and Mr. Marshall Monroe explore the diverse tactics that the CCP is using to pursue a soft power strategy designed to undermine US influence and increase its own. They ground this discussion in China’s historical experiences of humiliation at the hands of foreign powers, which are used by the CCP as motivation for its tight control over depictions of its rule in various sectors. This tight control of depictions of China includes the elimination of offending Western media representations of China, and the CCP enforces this control through censorship methods, such as blocking internet content, expelling foreign journalists, attacking or sanctioning Western political figures criticizing the CCP, and replacing American exceptionalist imagery with imagery of Chinese dominance. The CCP also uses soft power in media to positively portray China and its communist values while casting the West in a negative light. Davis and Monroe further highlight how significant Chinese financial stakes in sports, entertainment, and other global cultural institutions allow for further expansion of Chinese soft power, including censorship of media the CCP views as unacceptable to its strategic objectives (e.g., Hollywood movies with controversial imagery, tweets by an NBA manager supporting the Hong Kong protests). The authors also point out that China’s soft power is also expanding through monitoring and control of new media outlets such as TikTok and WeChat. Davis and Monroe tie China’s unrestricted soft power warfare model to gray zone competition and the CCP concept of “Military–Civil Fusion,” and they highlight the current lack of a US strategic vehicle to spend in the domain of “hearts and minds.” They propose meeting China’s challenge in the soft power domain through a public–private partnership focused on soft power with a centralized center of excellence (the National Center for Soft Power Strategies) that would be the hub for soft power strategy initiatives. This center would host the study of key soft power topics, be staffed by government representatives and private sector experts, and produce media to open international communication while emphasizing the attractiveness of democratic Western values.

### Chapter 8. Military Competition With China: Harder Than the Cold War?

Dr. Oriana Skylar Mastro begins her chapter by emphasizing that US national defense strategy has characterized the US–China relationship as one of great power competition (GPC). Both

the US and China have existing relationships in the Indo-Pacific region and are undergoing efforts to foster new relationships there as well. China's efforts, however, conflict with US military efforts to promote peace, strategy, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific, making them much harder to achieve. Mastro argues that it will be difficult to deter China's efforts—perhaps even more difficult than it was to deter the Soviet Union's efforts during the Cold War. She cites the geography of the Asia-Pacific (compared to that of Central Europe), the US's ongoing struggle to establish a credible deterrent, China's range of options for nonlethal but effective uses of force, and the lack of US willingness to grant China a parallel sphere of influence to that in which the Soviet Union was allowed to control as evidence to support her claim. Thus, Mastro recommends that the US must avoid relying on the same Cold War tools and competition strategies in its competition with China, despite their success in the past. Instead, the US needs to combat the threat posed by China through 1) convincing China that the costs of using force outweigh the benefits and 2) forging a counterbalancing coalition of allies and partners that are confident that the US will not only protect them from a military attack but other costly behaviors (e.g., economic coercion, diplomatic isolation) that China may leverage against them as well.

### Chapter 9. Cyber Competition With China: A Regional Approach

Mr. Alex Campbell and Mr. David Kirkpatrick argue that the US should pursue a cyber strategy toward China that accounts for key features of cyber operations, capitalizes on competitive advantages, and includes regional cooperation with key Asian allies. At the outset of their argument, they suggest that US cyber strategy should focus on thwarting Chinese cyber activity rather than shaping Chinese decision-making. The authors also lay out two priorities in US cyber competition: 1) thwarting against Chinese espionage and the damage it does to confidential military, political, and economic information; and 2) maintaining an open internet instead of merely restricting Chinese telecommunications networks. Campbell and Kirkpatrick then explore the idea for a regional cybersecurity coalition comprised of Indo-Pacific allies as a way to bolster the US's competitive posture and provide partners with increased protection against malicious Chinese cyber operations. They envision the coalition establishing a Combined Joint Persistent Engagement (CJPE) approach in which the core members (some candidates for which might be the Quad nations, the UK, Canada, and the ROK) would link defensive and offensive cyber operations and have access to benefits such as common cyber-defense, corroboration of cyber-attacks, and intelligence sharing. The authors also underscore how key cyberspace capabilities the US is developing, such as joint cyber-EW systems, could enable the coalition to pursue operations in the information environment (OIE) that undermine or erode the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) influence and control in the information environment (IE), thereby damaging the PLA's strategy and operations in the Indo-Pacific, both in cyberspace and beyond.

## Part 1. US Perspectives

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### Chapter 1. Hitting the Right C-Notes With China: Seeking Balance Along the Scale From Cooperation Through Conflict

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#### Abstract

*While future competition between the US and China is inevitable, conflict is not. In this chapter, I argue that the Biden administration must seek creative opportunities to shape US-China relations. To this end, I propose moving beyond over-emphasis on a single-dimension US foreign policy 'way' such as containment or confrontation, focusing instead on a multi-faceted approach based on a 5 "C-note" scale—cooperate, compete, contest, confront, and conflict. This allows the US to tailor its policy response for each specific topic, rather than insisting on cross-issue linkage. Each issue must stand on its own merits, with the entering expectation that for every tangible measure of progress in one area, there will often be setbacks in others. An additional emphasis on a sixth "C-note"—cognition (influence and information)—and closer cooperation and communication with allies and partners will strengthen the US's position. Additionally, instead of forcing a Manichean choice between realism and liberalism or insisting upon a single "C-note" way that could appropriately describe the full range of policy options available to the United States in its relations with China, striking a balance between these two core IR theories through managed interdependence while pursuing the right proportion of all five C-notes will be a much more fruitful strategy.*

History has a soothing way of distilling complex issues into more palatable, digestible explanations. The longer the period after inception, the more pronounced this trait becomes. The end of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, for example, is often attributed to the United States' consistent and successful policy of containment. This is, of course, a vast over-simplification of relations between the two countries for over almost a half-century, from the immediate aftermath of World War II until the Soviet Union broke apart. While containment was unquestionably one of the United States' core policies during this period, it was hardly the only one or, at times, even the most effective one. There is a strong case for pointing instead to a series of effective economic-oriented policies by successive United States administrations that, when combined with other containment actions and the Soviet Union's own disastrous economic and social policies, led ultimately to an unsustainable economic competition. The resulting multi-dimensional pressure, ruinous economic effects of

over-extension, and fatal structural flaws in the Soviet Union's political system, triggered an economic collapse and the subsequent disintegration of the Soviet empire.

Today, there is a desire to beat history to the punch by coining a convenient pithy term that captures the optimal United States policy towards China over the next decade—even before the Biden administration has fully established its national security and foreign policy teams, or fine-tuned its international relations (IR) 'theory of the case' for its approach to China. Nonetheless, until those core teams are completely settled and implementing the President's new foreign policy, it is still helpful to embark on the intellectual exercise of discussing the range of options across the competition continuum designed to achieve the United States' desired strategic end state. At one end, we can place agreeing to cooperate on future pandemic response efforts, and at the other, preventing China from becoming a global hegemon. A number of equally important desired outcomes reside throughout the rest of the spectrum to include: minimizing the probability of kinetic conflict between the two nations; sustaining US economic growth; strengthening alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Asia-Pacific; combating climate change; and productively addressing both the use and impact of emerging technologies. As detailed elsewhere in this SMA Perspectives paper, the objective is to use all elements of national power in search of the most effective combination of ways and means that supports achieving the stated ends, promotes "constructive competition," and avoids "destructive competition." As a precursor to that exercise, it is useful first to review the Trump administration's approach towards China over the past four years.

For the past thirty years globalization fueled a remarkable diffusion of ideas and technology, resulting in impressive economic gains in many areas of the world including the United States. For its part, China benefitted enormously from globalization, and is "perhaps the world's greatest beneficiary of interdependence" (Gewirtz, 2020). On the other hand, as the exogenous shock of COVID-19 revealed in stark terms, globalization's emphasis on maximizing economic efficiencies led to greater fragility in the global economy. It also underscored that some states still play by very different rules when it comes to international trade and protectionist policies. Of most concern to the United States, globalization's march led inexorably to a level of interdependence with China that, as viewed by the Trump administration, threatened both US economic power and national security. As Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman noted last year, globalization "creates extraordinary efficiencies but also extraordinary vulnerabilities" (Farrell & Newman, 2020). These asymmetric vulnerabilities and the inherent potential coercive power within them accelerated the Trump administration's interest in and actions toward decoupling—a policy that can be summarized as steps proposed, and in some cases taken, by the Trump administration to eliminate those critical dependencies the United States has on China.

The Trump administration's general approach to China can be framed as a combination of neorealist and neomercantilist IR theories. The administration prioritized hard power, supporting globalization and "soft power" only to the extent that they allowed the United States to gain the economic upper hand while pursuing its own self-interests globally. It

prioritized security through the acquisition of power, primarily in the form of maintaining a strong American military. In neorealist terms, China is presently the only nation in the world capable of great power competition with the US. Since China seeks to rival the United States' economic strength and military prowess, one of the Trump administration's primary objectives was to maintain a dominant relative advantage over China by preventing it from becoming a peer competitor and suppressing its ability to become a long-term hegemonic power.

The Trump administration also favored a distinctively mercantilist approach to relations with China, seeking to generate a relative trade advantage and protect US industries by maximizing American exports and minimizing imports. In the classic mercantilist cycle, power creates wealth and wealth creates power, explaining the preeminence of trade protectionist policies in the Trump administration. More specifically, this mercantilist approach drove the administration to pursue free trade only when it suited American interests. Otherwise, for instance when China was perceived to have been employing unfair trade practices, the administration imposed protectionist policies in the form of sanctions, tariffs, subsidies on traded goods, and export controls while calling for American companies to shift from off-to on-shore manufacturing. At the same time, the trade war between the United States and China served both to demonstrate US relative power and make it clear to Zhongnanhai that the Trump administration would not be bullied.

Decades of globalization had led to complex interdependencies between the United States and China that, from the viewpoint of the Trump administration, had become intolerable. The administration interpreted the resulting asymmetries in interdependence as potentially debilitating; creating economic and national security vulnerabilities inimical to their objective of maintaining a dominant relative advantage over China. The suspicions that China had already been 'weaponizing' interdependence were only reinforced during the initial COVID-19 response in early 2020. The recognition of considerable asymmetries generated in China's favor over the past several years, along with a new appreciation of the risk that China could and would capitalize on US vulnerabilities, led the Trump administration to accelerate its decoupling actions. Those decoupling activities, especially policies implemented in the aftermath of COVID-19 such as additional tariffs and sanctions, as well as Executive Orders on TikTok, ByteDance, and rare earth minerals, were designed to strengthen the United States' relative economic strength, limit China's sources of leverage over the United States, and suppress China's continued rise. Such actions are entirely congruent with neorealism and mercantilism.

One of the greatest challenges in trying to decouple the United States from China, however, is untangling the high degree of interdependence that already exists between the two nations. The staggering complexity inherent in many global supply chains today introduces a level of uncertainty that suggests that every decoupling action, however beneficial to the United States it might seem on the surface, can also introduce unknown future economic perturbations and commensurate risks that might actually weaken the United States' position and create even more relative advantages for China. Moreover, President Trump's almost exclusive focus on

economic and trade considerations placed broader national security implications of coupled states into a lesser category. In addition to the administration's attention on more traditional issues such as large capital investments in energy, steel, agriculture, and automobile manufacturing sectors, interdependence today demands as much, or even more, attention on other myriad areas to include international finance, communications, technology, information and data, intellectual property protection, and education exchanges—all of which represent areas worthy of deeper analysis as early as possible in the new administration.

The Biden administration entered the West Wing facing a number of substantial constraints and restraints as it sculpts its China policy. In fact, as a result of the prefabricated structure left behind by the Obama and Trump administrations, and the conditions—explicit or otherwise—that will be imposed or demanded by Congress, the media, think tanks, and the American public, there are likely to be more continuities than major differences between the Trump and Biden administrations' China policies (though hardcore mercantilism will likely be relegated to the bottom of the Biden administration's IR play list). On one hand, the more progressive and liberal wings of the Democratic party will find little support in the administration for focusing exclusively on non-martial areas such as climate change, the plight of the Uighurs, and pandemic response. On the other hand, the Biden administration will almost certainly eschew the most hawkish proposals advanced by many Republicans, and some of the most conservative Democrats, such as calling for a unidimensional approach to China centered entirely on global confrontation and conflict. At the same time, the other side always gets a vote: General Secretary Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will attempt to shape global events and influence Washington in ways designed to circumscribe the United States' ability to constrain China's rise, attempt to weaken its economic might and military power, or instigate actions that would jeopardize internal order. Despite the seemingly limited flexibility afforded to the new administration by the confluence of these factors, there is still a large range of options available along the cooperate-conflict continuum —options that offer promising opportunities to favorably shape the United States-China relationship over the next decade.

China is a near-term, pressing issue for the Biden administration. As the weightiest foreign policy issue on the new administration's agenda, it is a challenge that must be met head on from day one. Whatever risks arise from making a few early policy missteps will pale in comparison to the risks that start accruing rapidly as a result of inattention, inaction, or oblique approaches. As Michael Beckley and Hal Brands argue in a recent Foreign Affairs article, while the long-term strategic competition between the United States and China will resemble a marathon, the risk of a kinetic conflict will peak within the next decade (Beckley & Brands, 2020). Beckley and Brands contend that while the United States may ultimately prevail over the long term—due as much to China's internal fissures as any policies the United States might implement—in the short term the combination of the CCP's insecurity, demographics that will become increasingly unfavorable, uncertain future economic growth, growing military prowess and 'wolf warrior' diplomacy, and expected tepid reactions by other nations in the Asia-Pacific may lead Xi to instigate a confrontation with the United States—with the

possibility of escalation to kinetic conflict (OSD, 2020; Zhu, 2020). Similarly, the authors of a related RAND report analyzed four separate scenarios over the next thirty years: triumphant China, ascendant China, stagnant China, or imploding China (Scobell et al., 2020). They concluded that the first and last scenarios represented unlikely outcomes during this period, with near-equal probabilities assigned to the middle two. The authors also postulated three potential trajectories in US-China relations depending on the four scenarios: parallel partners (stagnant or ascending China), colliding competitors (triumphant China), or diverging directions (imploding China) (RAND, 2020).

Dozens of similar articles, studies, and reports over the past few years have reached the same definitive conclusion: The United States and China have embarked on a great power competition. The future of US-China relations must be framed around this central idea of peer strategic competition. Qualified terms such as “near-peer” or “rising power” are not only inaccurate but counterproductive, as they belie the scope and scale of the threat facing the United States. And as Elbridge Colby and Robert Kaplan argued recently, trying to view the US-China competition primarily through an ideological lens will have “potentially catastrophic results” (Colby & Kaplan, 2020). Yet even as complex and potentially dangerous as this relationship may become over the next decade, conflict is not inevitable. Instead, the policy choices made on both sides of the Pacific over the next several years—choices about strategic end states as well as whole-of-government and even whole-of-society ways and means—will collide in both predictable and unpredictable ways to shape the trajectory of the US-China relationship for the next half-century.

Acknowledging the limitations inherent in over-simplifying extremely complex foreign policy issues, and without making a case for specific means, I suggest that the US-China cooperation-conflict scale will comprise five primary “C-note” ways: cooperate (as one bookend), compete, contest, confront, and conflict (as the other bookend). One C-note conspicuous for its absence is “contain:” whatever comparisons between China and the Soviet Union that might have been appropriate or useful in the distant past, China today is nothing like either the Soviet Union or modern Russia. Its formidable and sustained economic growth, rapidly-modernizing all-domain military forces, limited global territorial ambitions (as opposed to a persistent aspiration for global access and influence, with growing capability and capacity to achieve both) and absence of a grand strategy to export the CCP ideology worldwide combine in a way to suggest that containment would be neither a feasible nor productive policy for the United States to pursue. It is also far too late to even contemplate such an approach.

It is not only possible but almost certain that all 5 C-notes will be in play simultaneously. Indeed, a successful strategy towards China is contingent upon such a multi-dimensional set of ways. Excessive focus on one C-note at the expense of all others would risk implementing a one-dimensional policy that could be effectively stymied as soon as an impasse was reached on any given singular issue. On the other hand, the administration should not be seduced by the idea that substantive progress on one policy issue should by itself imply a greater probability of reaching agreement on any other. The allure of cross-issue linkage has always

been far greater in principle than in reality. Each issue must stand on its own merits, with the entering expectation that for every tangible measure of progress in one area, there will often be setbacks in others. Without granting undue credence to the benefits of establishing relationships and building trust between US and PRC leaders, dealing with multiple policy issues simultaneously— no matter how contentious or trivial each may seem in isolation— will still help build upon foundational relationships established early in the new administration. It may also have a beneficial corollary in that it forces leaders of both the United States and China to provide more clarity on each country's desired strategic end state. There are more than enough issues of common concern in the world to require approaches encompassing all five C-notes simultaneously, either individually or in some combination depending on each side's objectives. It will also be important to make explicit the position that lack of progress in one contentious issue should not by default bring a halt to ongoing discussions over any other issue, though there may be compelling reasons to do so.<sup>1</sup>

There are ample opportunities for the United States and China to cooperate bilaterally and multilaterally on substantive policy issues. Cooperation is a desirable starting point when the expected results of negotiations improve global conditions, or when both sides stand to gain tangible benefits; even when on balance some outcomes might slightly favor one country over the other. There are several policy issues ripe for a cooperative approach, beginning with future pandemic response efforts, climate change, global information technology infrastructure, and international standards for emerging technologies such as 5G and artificial intelligence (AI). In these cases, President Biden and General Secretary Xi should first agree on broad principles regarding desired outcomes. Lead negotiators from both countries would then work together to determine how much specificity is desired or required before entering formal discussions.

Competition between the US and China will be sustained if not interminable. It is the natural resting middle note along the cooperation-conflict scale. As stated in the paper, "compete" encompasses both constructive and destructive competition. As argued elsewhere in this compendium, it is entirely possible to be in a state of constructive competition on one issue while in a state of destructive competition on another. For example, the issue of establishing international standards and norms for cyberspace and other technologies such as AI and 5G may begin as an area of potential cooperation between the US and China, but due to core differences in desired end states, it could progress over time into a constructive competition, with the stakes as high as determining who will serve as the de facto or even de jure global leader in these critical areas. At the same time, China's continued theft of intellectual property and flagrant violations of cyber norms could result in a destructive competition, leading the administration to apply sanctions against China, place PRC companies and people on various

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, the administration will face substantial resistance from many quarters, especially from China hawks in Congress, when seeking to cooperate with China in one area while at the precipice of confrontation in another. That will be a political leadership challenge, however, rather than evidence of a structural flaw in the proposed policy approach.

entity lists, or carry out targeted defensive or even offensive cyber actions. Xi would almost certainly retaliate in kind or through other means to maximize return pressure on the US. During the Trump administration, US-China trade discussions could be characterized initially as having all the characteristics of destructive competition. Interestingly, despite the tit-for-tat approach to sanctions and tariffs over the past two years, some US-China contentious trade issues shifted left along the scale to become areas of constructive competition, as Xi and Trump reached agreement on specific concerns even without fully resolving underlying structural differences.

Contest, confront, and conflict (or clash) are natural outgrowths of competition, primarily though not exclusively of the destructive type. They also will tend to escalate in the order shown—increasing in severity along the way. For the United States, the most evident policy issues likely to follow this ascending scale will be the South and East China Seas, Hong Kong, Taiwan, human rights (Xinjiang and Tibet), unfair trade practices, intellectual property theft, and even China's Belt and Road Initiative activities.<sup>2</sup> The United States should be prepared to contest China over each one of these issues. In some cases, the two nations will find offramps that allow easing back down the scale to constructive competition or even cooperation. In others, the United States may have no option other than to escalate to confrontation in the same or different domain, depending on its strategic objectives—such as when a US naval vessel is directly threatened by a PLAN or China Coast Guard ship during a Freedom of Navigation Operation in the South China Sea. While the law of unintended consequences underscores the difficulty of preventing isolated confrontations from escalating into broader and far more dangerous conflicts, for deterrence reasons alone the United States must be prepared to demonstrate that it will fight when core national interests are threatened. This deterrent value of a resolute, omnipresent, credible multi-domain military force cannot be overstated. Yet at the same time, leaders on both sides must avoid turning to military force as the solution of first resort, and if military forces of the two countries clash, those same leaders must be prepared to redouble efforts to preempt escalatory actions that risk spiraling out of control.

There is a critically important sixth "C" that undergirds all others and must be applied concurrently with them: cognitive. Information and influence will be as important to the future of US-China relations as any components of "hard power." This includes both protection (defense) from disinformation, deception, and deep fakes, as well as actions the United States takes to shape the information environment in its favor (offense). There is only so much the United States will be able to do to influence the Chinese people themselves—an area in which limited action is preferable to culturally inept attempts to influence Chinese "hearts and minds"—yet in every other part of the world the United States must be prepared to compete

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<sup>2</sup> China, of course, will have its own list of issues that have the same relative relevance to Xi and CCP leaders as the above list does to US leaders. Not all of those will fall within the intersection of the two sets of the US-China policy issue Venn diagram.

and where necessary confront China in the information environment. Deterrent merits of military hard power aside, the “soft power” tools of US-China competition will play an outsize role over the next several years. And while concurrent employment of all five C-notes will help preserve maximum flexibility for the US administration, it will also have the added advantage of presenting multiple dilemmas to PRC leaders.

In the competition between the US and China, America’s allies and partners represent one of its greatest strategic strengths. Early actions for the new administration should include repairing bilateral and multilateral relationships in the Indo-Asia-Pacific, restoring America’s role in regional free trade agreements, strengthening more recent security forums such as the Quad (the United States, Japan, Australia, and India), and striving to influence multilateral organizations such as ASEAN while accepting that each nation and organization must also deal with China in their own way. Including allies and partners across the cooperate-conflict continuum while also relying on their unique value-added in the information environment will be essential to building a united front and forcing the PRC to deal with multifaceted dilemmas. While few countries will be enthusiastic about joining the US in confronting China, to say nothing of participating in actual conflict, there will still be inestimable value in taking the default position with allies and partners on both sides of the Pacific that they will be included in discussions involving the administration’s approach to China.

US-China relations will be the defining foreign policy issue of the new administration. Instead of forcing a Manichean choice between realism and liberalism, or insisting upon a single “C-note” way that could appropriately describe the full range of policy options available to the United States in its relations with China, striking a balance between these two core IR theories and finding the right proportion of all five C-notes will be a far more fruitful strategy. Scott Kennedy and Jude Blanchette argued persuasively in 2019 for a China policy based on “managed interdependence” (Kennedy & Blanchette, 2019). This term embraces the reality of globalization yet also acknowledges that interdependence falls along a wide spectrum. It presents options for more narrow decoupling in critical areas, such as semiconductor manufacturing, rather than widespread disengagement that could risk global recession. A comprehensive, sustainable whole-of-government strategy based upon managed interdependence and adroit employment of all 5 C-notes, accompanied by actions and activities designed to favorably shape the cognitive environment, will preserve US economic and security advantages while minimizing asymmetric vulnerabilities. The extraordinary dexterity and pitch-perfect tone required to handle all five policy C-notes at once, while the cognitive chorus plays continuously in the background, will call for sublime leadership at every level across the administration. Yet when the stakes are this high, there is no acceptable alternative.

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## Chapter 2. Chinese Strategic Assessments of the United States and US-China Strategic Competition

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### Abstract

*For decades, China has pursued a regional and global strategy designed to sustain high levels of economic and technological development, protect or strengthen its various sovereignty claims along its borders, and raise its international prestige and influence overall. In recent years, these objectives have involved overt efforts to lead and shape the global system in various ways and more vigorously assert its sovereign and other "rights," including over disputed territories. Regarding the US, Beijing, in recent years, has increasingly sought with greater confidence to counter-balance what it sees as attempts by a weakening US to contain and undermine China. But how far Beijing goes in pursuing dominance over and zero-sum forms of competition with the US, and at what risk, will depend to a significant extent on US actions, especially toward Taiwan and other sovereignty disputes; CCP control within China; and the ability of the PRC to maintain stability and growth overall. Competition with China does not need to be zero-sum, exclusionary, and adversarial. US strategy must move back toward a more realistic balance between constructive competition, cooperation, and confrontation that reflects the complex reality of China and its impact on the US.*

### Overall PRC Development Objectives and Views

Since the advent of the reform era in the late seventies, Beijing has pursued a set of strategic objectives designed to support economic modernization while maximizing its physical security and advancing various sovereignty-related claims and upholding its international image. Such goals are clearly critical to social order, regime legitimacy, and China's great power aspirations. President Xi Jinping has described these goals as involving efforts to:

- complete the building of a moderately prosperous society in all respects by 2021, when the CCP celebrates its centenary; and
- build a modern socialist country that is strong, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious by 2049, when the People's Republic of China (PRC) marks its centenary (New China, 2017; An, 2017; Kou & Liu, 2017; People's Daily, 2013).

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<sup>3</sup> I am deeply indebted to Grace Cabuena for her vital assistance in the preparation of this article.

Xi has labeled these goals “The Chinese Dream” of achieving the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. In order to realize them, Beijing needs to create and sustain external conditions that: a) contribute to and do not threaten China’s overall national economic development program; b) assist China in dealing with a growing array of domestic social and economic challenges, from pollution to corruption, water scarcity, and deepening inequality; and c) protect Chinese territorial integrity and sovereignty claims.

Although the Xi Jinping regime still upholds the above development objectives and the resulting requirement for extensive and workable (if not always amicable) diplomatic relations, it also emphasizes the need for China to “strive for achievement,” or *Fenfa Youwei* (Brady, 2014; People’s Daily, 2013). As a result, Xi has largely discarded Deng Xiaoping’s longstanding notion of *Taoguang Yanghui*, defined as keeping a low profile and not taking leadership stances on the world stage.

Instead, Xi now stresses both *Weiwen* (supporting stability and order for growth) and *Weiquan* (supporting the advancement of Chinese *Quanli*, or “rights” for national pride and unity) (Sung, 2014).

This translates into greater efforts to advance Chinese interests, increase Chinese influence, and shape global norms by projecting China’s greater economic and military influence and playing on its supposed image as a peaceful, successfully developing power.

Chinese efforts in these areas have also been reinforced by a growing perception of declining relative US influence, both globally and with regard to China, due in part to China’s rise and in part because of US domestic and foreign policy mistakes or deficiencies that have weakened America’s influence, capabilities, and image internationally (Zhong, 2019; People’s Daily, 2020).

As a result of all these developments, in the security arena, Beijing has consistently pushed the notion that the US-led “hub and spokes” alliance structure in Asia is a “relic of the Cold War era” and not necessary for regional stability (Lee, 2015). More broadly, Beijing sees any type of potential US-led opposition to China’s rise as unnecessary, destabilizing, and highly threatening.

This criticism of US alliances and policies has increased greatly in recent years due to Chinese perceptions that Washington has transitioned to a largely bipartisan strategy of intense zero-sum rivalry with Beijing requiring efforts to weaken and contain China (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2020; Zhou, 2019; Segal, 2019). In addition to driving greater Chinese attempts to balance against and undermine US international leverage in many areas, this development has led to greater Chinese efforts to reduce dependency on the US in both economic and technological spheres and to improve relations with US friends and allies, in order to maintain their resistance to a US-led, largely zero-sum containment approach to China (Gewirtz, 2020).

The US shift to a more zero-sum, hardline stance toward China has also strengthened and apparently in some ways accelerated Beijing's long-standing goal of developing a first-rate military. This effort is driven on the broadest level by China's growing economic presence beyond Asia, the worsening of territorial sovereignty disputes along the Asian littoral, its increased economic dependence on sea lines of communication for essential resources, and of course its overall great power aspirations.

Beginning some 10-12 years ago, China began to augment its largely homeland- and Taiwan-based defense strategy by developing a capability to operate effectively further afield, beyond the so-called first island chain. Specifically, Chinese military strategy has transitioned from mainly "offshore defense" and Taiwan counter-intervention operations to a combined offshore defense with "open seas" protection, in order to "...manage the seas and oceans and protect maritime rights and interests, safeguard national sovereignty, protect strategic SLOCs, and participate in international maritime cooperation" (Xinhuanet, 2019).

Moreover, in late 2020, China announced the goal of "...building a mechanized, informationized and smart military, and strengthening training and readiness" and "enhancing strategic capacity to safeguard China's sovereignty, security and development interests..." by 2027, for the 100th anniversary of the founding of the PLA (Xinhuanet, 2020; ChinaDaily, 2020).

As part of this effort, Beijing also places a strong emphasis on developing capabilities in outer space and cyberspace. China has long rhetorically advocated the peaceful use of outer space, opposed the weaponization of outer space, and taken an active part in international space cooperation. Yet Beijing has also been developing land-based ASAT weapons and acquiring capabilities that could be used to engage in space-based warfare, if necessary (Vasani, 2017; OSD, 2020).

Beijing is also developing a cyber force and enhancing its capabilities in the areas of cyberspace situation awareness, cyber defense, and participation in international cyber cooperation, ostensibly "...to stem major cyber crises, ensure national network and information security, and maintain national security and social stability" (Xinhuanet, 2019).

Although all these recent actions amount to a more concerted effort by Beijing to weaken the US ability to contain and undermine China's economic and military growth and political influence, it remains far from clear that Beijing is committed to attaining clear dominance over the United States in all the key indices of national power as an essential objective. In military capabilities, technology, economic prowess, and financial power, Beijing is dedicated to becoming a (not necessarily "the") leading power, standing alongside and competing strongly with the United States.

To a great extent, how far Beijing pushes its aspirations (i.e., whether they become largely zero-sum goals that require American subordination), will depend largely on how adversarial and zero-sum the US becomes in its competition with China.

The Chinese leadership might think that the US is in relative decline, but it harbors no illusions that achieving dominance over the US would prove easy or necessarily benefit China. This is not only because the US will retain or recover critical elements of its national power, based on its huge advantages in natural resources, geographic location and absence of nearby threats, entrepreneurial drive, technological skills, and enduring political and legal systems. It also reflects the fact that unlike China, the US still enjoys a large number of friends and formal allies that will in many ways augment US power.

Given all this, the Chinese must realize that any effort to achieve global or even regional dominance over the US will prove extremely costly, could ultimately fail, or could place it in a virtually endless, mutually debilitating zero-sum rivalry with Washington. This implies that despite its ambitious goals and increasing suspicion and pushback toward the United States, Beijing's policies will necessarily allow for some level of flexibility that can make competition more constructive and less destructive, while keeping many doors open to some level of meaningful cooperation between the two powers.

The contingent and limited nature of Chinese goals and strategies can also be seen in the area of global governance, where Beijing upholds many of the goals and norms of different international regimes but also resists what it regards as excessive Western dominance and emphasis on liberal democratic values.

For the Chinese, the bedrock of any system of global governance must be "the common principle of the equality of sovereignty." For Beijing, this basic principle maintains not only the right of every state to preserve its territorial integrity and remain free from outside interference in its domestic affairs, but also its right to "choose its own social order and development path." Although by no means always upheld in practice, such rights are generally supported by other powers. For China, they also imply a greater reliance on UN-sanctioned approaches to infringing on or regulating the sovereign rights of states, as opposed to unilateral or small group interventions (Cheng, 2020; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2020).

Although at times itself hypocritical in practice, Beijing views infringements on national sovereignty as reflective of the power-centered international order defined and dominated by Western industrial states, led by the United States. In its rhetoric, Beijing advocates a supposedly less power-centered, more pluralistic (or multipolar) and cooperative order exemplified by Xi's notion of a "new type of international relations" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2013).

Therefore, while differing significantly with the United States and other liberal democratic nations on global norms regarding human rights and state sovereignty, it is simply untrue that China seeks to outright overturn the global order of regimes in many other areas, e.g., those governing free trade and finance, WMD proliferation, freedom of navigation, the peaceful resolution of disputes, and the management of transnational security threats.

In all these areas, China has over time become increasingly supportive of most prevailing norms, especially when compared with its Maoist past, while at the same time pressing for reforms in many global institutions that are in many cases long past due.

Overall, the key differences between US and Chinese approaches to global governance are therefore by no means all-encompassing and zero-sum. They include:

- the relative level of state/private involvement in economic behavior;
- the principles governing international agreements on issues ranging from WMD counter- proliferation to human and political rights;
- the definition of state sovereignty and justification for humanitarian intervention in the domestic affairs of nation-states;
- the legal principles required to adjudicate various interstate sovereignty disputes, especially in the maritime area; and
- proper relative levels of voting power in key international institutions held by China (and perhaps other developing nations), compared with the United States and Western democracies.

There is at least some room for mutual compromise and restraint in each of these areas. And despite some American rhetoric to the contrary, Beijing is not energetically engaged in a deliberate effort to duplicate its system across the developing world, nor poised to establish a predatory, debt-inducing network of dominance across Eurasia via the supposedly pernicious Belt and Road initiative (Brautigam, 2019; Kratz et al., 2019). In fact, unlike many 19th and early 20th century imperialist powers, it does not possess an ideology or mindset that views the acquisition of other territories or the coercive expansion of its system to other countries as essential to its continued national vitality.

Thus, all in all, and despite the above developments and differences, Beijing continues to recognize its need, for its own self-interest, to sustain substantive areas of cooperation with Washington and avoid slipping into a truly adversarial, destructive form of competition.

As Evan Medeiros recently observed, in assessing China's response to Trump's hardline approach to China, Beijing still desires to "...avoid confrontation with the United States and manage US demands; defer any major internal Chinese debates (and associated conclusions) about a new strategy toward the United States; reassure the international community that China will be a source of stability and prosperity; stabilize China's immediate Asian periphery to limit its exposure to confrontation with Washington; and look for opportunities to expand its presence and influence (in places where the United States has stepped back)" (Medeiros, 2019).

## Implications for the US and Sino-US Strategic Relations

The above description of Chinese strategic views and goals strongly indicates several factors relevant to Beijing's attitude toward competition and cooperation with the United States.

First, it is by no means clear that Beijing's search for greater power and influence in various policy arenas translates into a strategic commitment to attaining global or even Asian preeminence as a necessary condition for national success.

One does not need to believe Beijing's endless recitation of the desire for "win-win" outcomes to recognize that it is constantly adjusting its external policies to elicit support from other nations, while at the same time increasing its relative leverage. This sometimes-contradictory effort cannot be reduced to a simple one-to-one correlation between domestic insecurity and high-stakes political competition on the one hand and overseas aggression and dominance on the other.

As stated above, the Chinese realize that the costs and risks involved in a Chinese attempt to displace the US as the dominant global power are huge and unlikely to diminish to such a degree in the decades ahead that Beijing would conclude it is worth the effort to undertake—unless, of course, the US makes it clear that it is using its global dominance to support efforts to strangle China and overthrow its government.

Second, competition with China does not need to be zero-sum, exclusionary, and adversarial. While increasingly assertive, the Chinese see the obvious problems of such a stance. Moreover, such an approach will greatly undermine those voices within China who favor moderation in US-China rivalry, significantly raise the danger of Sino-American crises and military conflict, and divert huge amounts of US resources away from desperately needed non-military uses at home and abroad.

Equally important, as suggested above, there is considerable room for positive-sum, constructive types of Sino-US competition in many areas, including trade and investment, technology, the development or revision of many global norms, approaches to common threats such as pandemics and climate change, and even military security. The challenge is to clearly define whether, where, and how the US should retain superior capabilities, accept equal capabilities, or simply not compete.

In general, the US should: a) improve the superior capacity of its pluralistic, democratic, and rule-of-law system to preserve domestic order and prosperity and inspire other countries; b) strengthen its reliance on and influence within multilateral, consensual structures and fora; c) retain or strengthen its ability to compete with Beijing and other powers in preserving key global regimes (in part by supporting compromising revisions of the norms basic to those regimes); and d) increase the incentives for all countries to compete constructively in combating common threats.

Third, in the area of military security, and especially in the Asia-Pacific, the US can and should seek to create understandings with Beijing based on mutual restraint and (to the degree possible) clear red lines. Neither Washington nor Beijing will benefit from unrestrained, open-ended arms races in a futile search for long-term military primacy; nor will the two powers benefit from vague, undefined statements of interest.

In Asia, it is possible to create the political and military conditions for a stable balance of power, involving some level of arms control, denial (not control)-oriented force postures and doctrines, and tension-reducing CBMs and political understandings. This of course also requires a demonstrated US ability to respond effectively if China opts for destructive forms of military (and economic) competition or conflict (Swaine et al., 2021).

And this, along with creating the ability to compete effectively with Beijing in a constructive manner, will require much greater efforts to improve America's political, economic, and military capabilities by overcoming domestic dysfunction, polarization, extremism, human rights abuses, and economic and technological shortcomings. Such domestic improvements, along with a convincing willingness and ability to seek compromise and convey resolve where needed, are the most important requirements for creating an effective competitive relationship with China.

Fourth, China's highly contingent, competitive, and cooperative approach to relations with the US and the West in general indicates that it is both possible and necessary to seek to shape Chinese policies and goals, to strive for areas of mutual compromise, and to provide "off-ramp" opportunities for Beijing to deescalate from destructive to constructive competition.

This will require that Washington keep the door open to peaceful, uncoerced resolutions of any kind to potentially volatile issues such as Taiwan and other sovereignty disputes, strengthen dialogues with Beijing and US friends and allies on the long-term strategic environment (both in Asia and globally), and improve the capacity of all relevant countries to reduce the chances of miscalculation in possible political-military crises between the US and China.

Fifth, in order to preserve constructive competition and enhance incentives for compromise and cooperation with China, Washington also needs to stop portraying China as an existential threat and pushing for the end of the PRC regime and listen more to the more moderate, positive-sum views and interests of its friends and allies. But it should also demand that Beijing end its efforts to use the notion of "foreign threats" and outside bullying to garner domestic support. In general, hostile efforts to simply decouple from or clearly dominate China or destroy its political system will lead to destructive forms of competition that will benefit neither side.

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## Chapter 3. For China, the Cold War Never Ended

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### Abstract

*How does China see competition with the United States? The leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) view themselves as being in a long-term struggle against enemies domestic and foreign, with the primary rival in international society being with the United States, which they see as trying to undermine the Party's hold on power and prevent the rise of a powerful China. CCP leaders see the roots of their conflict with the U.S. as originating prior to the 1949 founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and as having intensified in the post-1991 era as the United States has leveraged a wide variety of tools to undermine the Party's hold on power (Kania, 2019). For the CCP, the original Cold War never truly ended; rather, they believe Washington merely switched tactics in how it sought to bring down the CCP from the 1990s through the 2010s. To counteract calls for democratization following the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, the CCP replaced class struggle with a historical narrative focused on national humiliation, also highlighting the risks of chaos, a China broken up by domestic enemies aided by foreign intervention, and Taiwanese independence (Gries, 2005; Wang, 2012). Xi Jinping's political vision has centered around the promise of redeeming this "wounded nationalism" by achieving a "China Dream" of "national rejuvenation" that will enable China to stand on par with, or even surpass, the United States. Domestically, the US, its allies and partners, and groups within China willing to collaborate with "hostile foreign forces" are portrayed as a collective threat to the CCP's continuing hold on power and China's eventual global preeminence. Accordingly, in its external messaging, China tries to complicate efforts to balance its rise by alternately signaling an openness to cooperation and attacking those who criticize it as hegemonic, unreconstructed Western imperialists, an approach based on propaganda, united front work, and the "three warfares." Today, as China's "comprehensive national power" (or economic, political, military, cultural, technological, educational and human resources) approaches that of the United States, Chinese thinkers anticipate growing friction as a "declining" US seeks to resist the PRC's efforts to catch up and overtake it. In their public pronouncements, Chinese leaders talk of wanting a "win-win" relationship with the US, even as they look to establish an international order favorable to CCP and PRC interests. They seek to do this by forestalling strategic pressure, dangling the promise of cooperation while stigmatizing those who favor competition as harboring a "Cold War mentality."*

### Introduction: From Enemy #1 to Tacit Partner and Back Again

The PRC's founding myth is that it was built by a revolutionary party that led a war of national resistance culminating in the successful conquest of political power so that the Chinese people

could “stand up.” This myth presents the US as irrelevant to the defeat of Imperial Japan, an ally to the CCP’s political enemies in the Nationalist Party, and an imperial power bent on resisting China’s national liberation. PRC leaders see substantial consistency in US policies toward China over the seven decades since their seizure of power, with the US always having opposed the CCP and having sought to keep China weak and incapable of challenging American preeminence. After 1949, the Eisenhower–Dulles policy of containment and “peaceful evolution,” together with Washington’s involvement in the Korean War, the 1954 and 1958 Taiwan Strait crises, and efforts to support Tibetan resistance, proved that the US was China’s primary enemy (Conboy & Morrison, 2002). Even after Soviet “social imperialism” replaced the concerns posed by the US, PRC leaders continued to worry about the US threat.

Following the 1979 normalization of relations, Chinese leaders continued to remain highly suspicious of US intentions and vigilant about the prospect that greater contact could be a prelude to unleashing transformational forces inside China. The Taiwan Relations Act and the Reagan administration’s Six Assurances signaled to the CCP leadership that the US was not to be trusted and that any temporary cooperation was more a tactical arrangement to push back against an aggressive Soviet threat than a more strategic reconciliation between the US and China (Ross, 1997). Hardliners within the CCP leadership were particularly concerned about the prospect that Deng’s “reform and opening up” policies would lead to a restoration of capitalism, a relaxation of control leading to “bourgeois liberalization,” and the eventual collapse of the CCP if not confronted forcefully (Baum, 1996; Fewsmith, 1994; Harding, 1987; Meisner, 1996). For hardliners, events such as the 1983 “strike hard” campaign, the 1986–1987 crackdown on student protests, and the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre were necessary to prevent “black hands” (i.e., protesters backed by the United States) from toppling the CCP from power (Tanner, 2000; Fang, 1991; Black & Munro, 1993; Nathan & Link, 2001).

## You Always Had It in for Us: The US Seen as Attempting to Prevent China’s Rise Post-1991

Throughout the 1990s, Beijing’s view was that the US, having defeated the Soviet Union and dispatched Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, had now turned its attention to China with its coordinated post-Tiananmen sanctions campaign, its successful efforts to block Beijing from hosting the 2000 Olympic Games, and its conditioning of Most-Favored Nation trading status on improvements in the PRC’s human rights (until 1994). Furthermore, through its support for and defense of Taiwan during the 1995–1996 Third Taiwan Strait Crisis, its updating of the US–Japan Defense Guidelines in 1997, and its strike against the PRC’s Belgrade embassy in 1999 (which Chinese official statements insist was intentional), the US seemingly made evident its intent to humble the PRC and bring about its political disintegration and/or democratization. Chinese leaders took note of US claims that the combination of economic development and the rise of a middle class, the growth of the rule of law (promoted by US NGOs and formal assistance programs), the Internet, and China’s admission to the World Trade Organization would hopefully lead to greater liberalization and eventually democratization. To counter any prospective counter-balancing coalition that the US might

seek to assemble, the PRC took public diplomacy steps to frame its own rise in unthreatening terms. It caricatured the “China threat theory” as an exaggeration of the risks posed by growing Chinese economic and military power and influence that only those who misunderstand China or bear it ill will could believe. Chinese analysts frequently characterized the US as hegemonic, unrestrained, and questing after “absolute security.”

## Post-9/11: The Period of “Strategic Opportunity” Finally Arrives

Deng Xiaoping had proclaimed peace and development the overriding themes of the era in the early 1980s and announced a period of “strategic opportunity” likely to last until 2020. During the 1990s, however, China’s chief rival often appeared to be pulling away in terms of national power, with the US moving from strength to strength in terms of economic, military, norm-setting, and technological advantages. Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the US rapidly invaded and defeated the Taliban and then turned its sights on Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, quickly and decisively defeating Baghdad’s organized forces a second time en route to toppling the regime. However, while Washington’s two wars and promotion of democratization in the Arab world alarmed Beijing, they also signaled the US could not focus its full resources on countering China’s growing power.

Throughout the remainder of the 2000s and into the 2010s, PRC observers perceived the US hand behind the numerous “color revolutions” in Eastern Europe as well as the “Arab spring,” even as many in China also perceived the US and the West as facing long-term stagnation and relative decline after 2008. America was seen as hampered by the financial crisis, domestic political gridlock, and two inconclusive wars; by contrast, Chinese leaders believed they had hosted a successful Olympics and were better positioned than their rival to weather the financial crisis, an attitude that led to an increasingly assertive set of Chinese foreign policies (Scobell & Harold, 2013). While State Councilor Dai Bingguo asserted in a December 2010 essay that China would persist in pursuing a foreign policy of “peaceful development” (Dai, 2010), Xi Jinping quickly pushed China to accelerate its efforts to revise the international order in its favor by “striving for achievement” (Yan, 2014).

## Power Transition Leads to Deepening Great Power Tensions

At the beginning of the 2010s, PRC observers increasingly worried that while it might be declining, the US was also seeking to support a “Jasmine Revolution” in China (Page, 2011). Chinese leaders were shocked in February 2012 when Wang Lijun, the chief of police and a key aide-de-camp of Chongqing Party Secretary Bo Xilai, fled to the US Consulate in Chengdu. Additionally, the 2010 WikiLeaks dump of US diplomatic cables and the May 2013 claims by National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden fueled even greater concerns about US intentions and capabilities. As China’s interference in Hong Kong grew more brazen from 2012 onwards, Beijing came to fear the US was taking steps to promote “peaceful evolution” inside mainland China and split off Hong Kong (Van Oudenaren, 2015). CCP leaders offered dire warnings about the threat posed by “universalist values” and “Western constitutional democracy” in the CCP’s 2013 Document No. 9, and a widely circulated PLA video held that

a “Silent Contest” between the United States and China was afoot (Buckley, 2013; Perlez, 2013). PRC leaders appeared to believe, as Yuan Peng, Vice-President of the Chinese Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) argued, that “it would be naive to expect that the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation can be easily achieved without struggle” (Yuan, 2020).

Internationally, PRC observers alternatively complained about the US “rebalance” either encouraging US allies and partners to confront China or else providing them with an opportunity to drag the US into their own preexisting conflicts with Beijing. When Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spoke up about the South China Sea (SCS) disputes in Hanoi in 2010, when Japan arrested a Chinese fishing boat captain near the Senkakus and later nationalized several of those islands, when the US restated the applicability of Article V of the Mutual Security treaty to those features, and when the Philippines filed a lawsuit at the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea challenging China’s expansive maritime claims in the SCS, Chinese observers saw a US plot to contain China. Further evidence came in the forms of US efforts to bolster American defenses in the region, including through forward deployment of advanced forces, basing and access agreements that diversified where US forces could operate from, new operational concepts for access and maneuver designed to counter China’s anti-access/area denial or counter-intervention capabilities, and a “3rd Off-Set” designed to preserve the US lead on advanced military technologies. In the geo-economic space, the US promoted a Trans-Pacific Partnership, tried to undercut China’s efforts to stand up an Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and blocked a number of Chinese investments in the United States.

With the transition from Obama to Trump, Chinese leaders appear to have initially expected a more transactional relationship with Washington. Although put off by then-President-elect Trump’s call with Taiwan’s President Tsai Ing-wen, the Chinese leadership seems to have believed it could still corral the Trump administration via patent approvals for products sold by members of the first family, promises of trade purchases, and appeals to the then-president’s ego. In time, however, it became clear that while the Trump presidency was doing tremendous damage to US global leadership and alliances—the undermining of which is a long-standing Chinese policy goal (Liff, 2017)—the administration would also pose new problems for China. These included the trade war, efforts to counter the Belt and Road Initiative, building a 5G coalition to undercut Chinese communications technology firms, modernizing foreign investment review mechanisms and blocking deals, and shuttering China’s consulate in Houston. The US also sold arms to Taiwan, passed the Taiwan Travel Act and the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative Act, and lifted State Department restrictions on contacts with Taiwan officials. It went further and sanctioned numerous Hong Kong officials, terminated Hong Kong’s special separate treatment, and sanctioned PRC officials responsible for the genocide China is perpetrating in Xinjiang. As Zhu Feng, Director of the Institute of International Studies at Nanjing University argued, “China believes the U.S. is attempting to divide, weaken and Westernize China” (Zhu, 2020). Da Wei, Assistant President of the University of International Relations, echoes this view, noting “an

emerging mainstream view that the U.S. has a crystal-clear goal—to keep China down” (Da, 2019).

For his part, Chinese Ambassador to the United States Cui Tiankai criticized the Trump administration’s steps as founded on a misperception of China’s intentions, arguing that it is “extremely dangerous and irresponsible to base America’s policy on alarmism and [to] label China as a strategic rival and even adversary” (Cui, 2019). Yuan Peng of CICIR was even more explicit, arguing that the trade war “reveals the essence of the U.S. China strategy, which includes the merciless suppression of rivals. It tests the unity and tenacity of the Communist Party of China and the ability of the Chinese people to resist as major risks and challenges are confronted” (Yuan, 2020). Echoing this view, Foreign Minister Wang Yi commented in August 2020 that bilateral relations were “facing the gravest challenge since the establishment of diplomatic ties” (Wang, 2020). Zhao Minghao notes that many Chinese experts believe the two countries have entered a “post-engagement” period, further commenting that such observers also “acknowledge the inevitability of US–China strategic competition...[and see] the narrowing power gap [as] its most decisive driver...[with] ideological disagreements, changes of mutual perceptions, and policy agenda conflicts [being the other] key factors fueling U.S.–China strategic competition” (Zhao, 2019). Wu Xinbo, Director of the Center for American Studies at Fudan University, summarized this Chinese perspective, stating “confrontation in every realm... is the Trump administration’s China policy” (Wu, 2019). As a result, Wang Jisi of Peking University has argued that “China-U.S. ties today may be worse than the Soviet-U.S. relationship,” (Wang, 2020) while Shi Yinhong of Renmin University, adds that “[c]ompared with Anglo-German rivalry in 1907, the current geopolitical picture seems even starker!” (Shi, 2019).

On the plus side, from China’s perspective, the Trump presidency substantially undermined the ability of the US to rally allies and partners to counter China through its withdrawal from key international organizations and agreements such as the Paris Climate Accord, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, and the World Health Organization. These steps provided China an opportunity to blunt efforts to rally a coalition to push back on China’s more assertive foreign policy steps, which it characterized as efforts to pursue a new, illegitimate Cold War that would be destined to fail (Yang, 2018). While the COVID-19 pandemic posed a threat to Beijing, it also became an opportunity when the US so mishandled the crisis that China was able to combine offers of personal protective equipment with a coordinated disinformation campaign (Zhao, 2020) and aggressive “wolf warrior diplomacy” (Sun, 2020) to shift blame to the US. Shen Dingli of Fudan University summed up this view as the Trump administration “attempting to pass the buck...and failing in its responsibility as a major power” by blaming China for the COVID pandemic (Shen, 2020).

### [Holding Open the Window by Playing to the Adversary’s Perceived Preferences](#)

With the advent of the Biden administration, China appears to be seeking a reduction in tensions and relief from pressure across multiple areas so as to grow stronger. Chinese analysts

are aware of the numerous policy issues confronting the United States and have sought to dangle the promise of conditional cooperation on these, provided the US backs away from confrontation with Beijing. Some PRC America watchers, such as Zhao Minghao of the Chahar Institute, are hopeful that the Biden administration might be willing to return to a less confrontational posture if China offers to cooperate on addressing climate change, countering the pandemic, and restoring economic growth (Zhao, 2021). Tao Wenzhao of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of American Studies (CASS IAS) agrees that the Biden presidency may have opened a "window of opportunity for China and the United States to start rebuilding relations" but argues the US must stop,

"challeng[ing] China's current political system and vilif[ying] the leadership of the Communist Party of China...foster[ing] and conniv[ing] with pro-independence forces in Taiwan, support[ing] separatism in Xinjiang and Hong Kong...[making] trouble in the South China Sea...suppress[ing] Chinese high-tech industries...[and doing] everything possible to obstruct normal people-to-people exchanges" (Tao, 2020).

Yuan Zheng, Tao's colleague at CASS IAS, focuses particularly on Taiwan, arguing that the US has been "playing the island as a card...to contain the Chinese mainland" and noting that this must change for cooperation to deepen (Yuan, 2020). Yet others note that China faces its own challenges, with Shi Yinhong signaling that China is likely to pursue a "strategic retrenchment" as a result of changes in "the strategic situation," including downwards pressure on the Chinese economy, an "ominous" change in the external environment, and a new assessment of national resources available due to a long-term slowdown of GDP growth and an enormous increase in needed state expenses (Shi, 2019). "The most likely scenario" for US-China relations, argues Tsinghua University's Jia Qingguo, is that the two countries "cooperate to some extent but various frictions will complicate things" (Jia, 2020). Chen Dongxiao, President of the Shanghai Institute of International Studies, concurs that "competition will be the defining feature of the bilateral relationship for the foreseeable future and a reversion to the status quo ante is impossible...[though] there are plenty of shared interests and common concerns that warrant closer coordination between the two superpowers" (Chen, 2021).

Not all PRC observers are optimistic that the prospects for cooperation will improve. Cui Liru, former President of CICIR, assesses that "strategic competition [is now] the dominant facet of the relationship...[and that] is not likely to change...[all that] will change is the manner in which that policy is carried out" (Cui, 2020). Former Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs He Yafei has warned that "persistent ideologically charged Cold War-style rhetoric on the U.S. part has severely worsened... bilateral ties and resulted in increasingly negative feelings on both sides," averring that criticism of China by Americans such as NSC officials Jake Sullivan and Kurt Campbell reflects "ignorance about Chinese culture and [a] Judeo-Christian sense of cultural superiority [that has] led to prejudice against the Chinese political and social systems" (He, 2020). And National People's Congress Foreign Affairs Committee Chairwoman Fu Ying has likewise stated that the Biden administration needs to recognize that "the U.S. attempt to incorporate political values into globalization is wrong" (Fu, 2020).

PRC officials appear to be using carrots and sticks to encourage the Biden administration to reduce pressure on China. Yang Jiechi, Director of the Office of Foreign Affairs Work of the Central Committee, has stated that bilateral ties “now stand at a key moment...[with the two sides needing] to restore the relationship to a predictable and constructive track of development,” primarily by the US making concessions on a series of issues of concern to China (National Committee on U.S.–China Relations, 2021). In their phone call of early February, Xi Jinping told President Biden that China and the US should reestablish normal contacts and work to achieve common outcomes, while also warning that China would not compromise on its maritime claims, tolerate US involvement in China’s dispute with Taiwan, nor brook criticism over Hong Kong, Xinjiang, or other human rights issues (Crowley, 2021).

In closing, the CCP believes that the geopolitical struggle with the United States and its allies is inextricably linked to its domestic battles against those forces favoring freedom and democracy; is unavoidable, existential, and perpetual; and will require eternal vigilance. Chinese diplomatic messaging will likely continue to disavow any desire for strategic competition, mock the notion of a “China threat” as a tactic to discredit foreign observers who favor more competitive US policies and postures, and lay the blame for any tensions squarely at the feet of “anti-China” forces in the United States.

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## Chapter 4. Trends of the Times: Foundations of Beijing's View on Competition With the United States

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### Abstract

*While China's leaders readily acknowledge their nation's burgeoning competition with the United States, their understanding of the forces driving this competition are profoundly different than what is typically heard by American foreign policy leaders in Washington. Broadly speaking, China's leaders see competition with the United States less as a strategy or a choice of foreign policy but rather the outgrowth of unavoidable geopolitical forces. Moreover, competition with the United States is not seen as an end in itself, but rather as a means in Beijing's efforts to make the world safe for the Chinese Communist Party to pursue its interests without obstacle or objection, to encourage international deference to the Party's interests and strategies, and to build Chinese material power toward those ends.*

### Introduction

This article seeks to provide a conceptual foundation to understand China's approach to its competition with the United States. It describes how China's leaders view this competition, the assumptions these views are based upon, and the implications of these views for US strategy. It describes what China's leaders seek to accomplish, explains the theoretical underpinnings of how Beijing views competition with the United States, and evaluates what may drive China to escalate from competition and coercion to conflict.

But first, a note of caution. There is a distinct danger in articles such as these to over-generalize the views of China's leadership or to reduce the foundations of their views to cultural essentialism. Indeed, Asia has long been a region where US images of the "other" have been rife with stereotyped generalizations about the views and behavior of states as unknowable, mysterious, or imbued with superhuman patience and a clear-eyed understanding of history. The reality is that debates about the nature of international politics and the ideal approach to foreign policy have been active for centuries of Chinese history and are ongoing today. There is no singular "Chinese" way of understanding the role of conflict in human affairs or the nature of international politics, just as there is no essentially "American" way of seeing the world.

What follows is therefore an analysis of dominant thinking among China's policy elite, based on readings of official Chinese publications and the theoretical works at the foundation of the

Chinese Communist Party's ideological worldview. It does not describe the several ongoing debates occurring within China's academic and policy communities, nor does it portend to look inside the mind of Xi Jinping. Instead, it describes the underlying ideas and concepts that inform how China's leaders view competition with the United States.

## What Beijing Wants

Throughout the history of US foreign policy since the beginning of the Cold War, American leaders have at times made uninformed and inaccurate assumptions about the drivers of our adversary's actions, repeatedly leading to strategic disaster. For example, many believed that North Korea would never attack South Korea because of Stalin's fear of nuclear war with the United States—a belief based on the erroneous assumption that the Communist bloc was unified, Stalin's control was absolute, and Mao would be unwilling to fight the United States so quickly after the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Rose, 2001; Riedel, 2017). Similarly, Americans went into Vietnam assuming they were saving the country from a Communist insurgency directed by Moscow, instead of recognizing the reality that the United States was intervening in a civil war based more on nationalism and anti-colonialism than Cold War competition (McNamara, 1996).

Today, as the United States adapts its strategies and investments to account for its deepening competition with the People's Republic of China (PRC), the US must be careful to avoid based on similarly erroneous assumptions of Beijing's ambitions. An example of this phenomenon can be found in the so-called *Longer Telegram*, recently authored anonymously by a former senior government official "with deep expertise and experience dealing with China," which identifies Chinese President Xi Jinping's top four objectives as to:

1. Leapfrog the United States as a technological power and thereby displace it as the world's dominant economic power;
2. Undermine US dominance of the global financial system and the status of the US dollar as the global reserve currency;
3. Achieve military preponderance sufficient to deter the United States and its allies from intervention in any conflict over Taiwan, the South China Sea, or the East China Sea; and
4. Diminish the credibility of US power and influence sufficiently to cause those states currently inclined to "balance" against China to instead join the bandwagon with China (Anonymous, 2021).

While there is little to disagree with here (and China certainly seeks to achieve these objectives), they are generally more byproducts of China's strategy rather than the objectives of the strategy itself. In other words, this analysis misconstrues China's ends with its means. Specifically, the first four objectives identified in this article focus on China's power in relation to that of the United States. This is a mistake: Beijing's core objectives are first and foremost focused on China and the Chinese Communist Party, not Chinese power solely as it relates to that of the United States.

In its annual report on Chinese military power, the US Department of Defense does a more accurate job of describing Beijing's primary objectives: "China's strategy seeks to realize 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.' This objective, which President Xi Jinping calls 'the Chinese Dream,' is a long-held national aspiration to 'restore' China to a position of strength, prosperity, and leadership on the world stage" (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. 2). The report goes on to note the following:

For decades, China's leaders have framed the pursuit of modernity and power as advancing China along a specific trajectory with the PRC's centenary in 2049 as the target when China seeks to achieve national rejuvenation and become a "great modern socialist country." From the Party's perspective of China as a developing nation that must transition into a "fully developed and highly advanced" socialist society, this trajectory involves the CCP shepherding China through different stages of gradual but systematic modernization and development. The CCP demarcates the stages of China's strategy with milestones, each with objectives and priorities determined by the Party's leaders and planning processes (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. 3).

For Beijing, the United States and other countries are primarily viewed within the context of their ability to assist or impede China's ability to achieve its objectives—not as objectives themselves. For Beijing, the United States is simply in the way of achieving the Party's deeper objectives. China's objectives are therefore largely self-reflective and self-oriented. Ultimately, Beijing seeks to make the world safe for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to pursue and achieve its objectives without obstacle or objection. Beijing's objective, therefore, is not dominance per se, but deference. Surpassing the United States, undermining its alliances and partnerships, weakening international institutions, subverting international laws, and establishing a Sino-centric geopolitical order are therefore not Beijing's fundamental objectives; rather, they are the byproducts of a strategic orientation that is focused solely on building China's national power.

## Views of Competition

The question "how does China think about competition with the United States" therefore involves a critical assumption: that China's leaders think about competition as a strategic option that they could either accept or reject. However, this is an erroneous assumption, as China's leaders operate within a set of deeply-rooted, persistent, and consistent set of assumptions about the strategic environment that leads China's leaders to see competition as an essential, inevitable aspect of the nature of international politics itself (Johnston, 1995a, 258).

In his landmark study of Chinese strategic culture, Alastair Iain Johnston describes a dominant Chinese strategic culture, which he calls the *Parabellum Paradigm*, which "assumes that conflict is a constant feature of human affairs, that it is due largely to the rapacious or threatening nature of the adversary, and that in this zero-sum contact the application of violence is highly efficacious for dealing with the enemy" (Johnston, 1995, p. 249). Mao Zedong added a Marxist

patina to these assumptions, espousing the battle between socialism and capitalism and casting China as the vanguard of a “Third World” movement to revive China’s central position in the international community and challenge the legitimacy of the existing international order, which Mao saw as the product of Western domination and thus inimical to revolutionary China (Jian, 2019). Xi Jinping has supported the continued embrace of Marxist views of competition, declaring in 2013 that “facts have repeatedly told us that Marx and Engels’ analysis of the basic contradictions in capitalist society is not outdated, nor is the historical materialist view that capitalism is bound to die out and socialism is bound to win” (Greer, 2019).

What is essential here, especially for this essay, is the assumption that competition is an inherent and unavoidable element of international politics. While some in the West view this approach as roughly analogous to Western political theories of international anarchy, there are several important distinctions. First, for China’s leaders, assumptions about the sovereign equality of states—a foundational concept of the post-Westphalian international system—appears to be little more than a rhetorical nicety which papers over their view of a natural hierarchy of nations. In Beijing’s view, as described by then-Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi at a meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 2010, “China is a big country and you are small countries, and that is a fact” (Mitchell, 2016).

This reflects the official Chinese interpretation of Asian history, in which China was the dominant regional power for centuries—militarily, politically, culturally, and economically. For Beijing, this was a natural and appropriate arrangement that brought stability and prosperity for the region. According to the official CCP narrative, it was the West’s efforts to undermine China and subvert the natural regional order that ended China’s centuries of dominance and heralded what Beijing calls the “Century of Humiliation,” a period from the mid-19th century to 1949 when China was humiliated and kept down by rapacious foreign powers.

The struggle of large and small, powerful and weak, and dominant and rising is, in the view of contemporary Chinese leaders, an inherent element of international politics. Broadly speaking, China’s leaders view China as a country on the rise, while they perceive the United States to be in the midst of a gradual but unmistakable decline. Competition between China and the United States, therefore, is not a matter of choice but rather is a natural and unavoidable reality of international politics. Taken in tandem with Beijing’s self-serving and self-oriented objectives, China views competition with the US less as an object of strategy and more as a means for China to assume its rightful place atop the global hierarchy of nations.

The second significant difference between Western assumptions of international anarchy and Beijing’s view is rooted in the CCP’s Marxist-Leninist ideology and, specifically, the foundational theory of “dialectical materialism.” Put briefly (Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao all published entire books on the subject), dialectical materialism perceives human existence as an eternal dialectical process based on the material world—that physical material is a greater determinant of natural laws and human events than ideas. Or, as Xi put it in a

major 2015 address to CCP cadres: “The most important thing is that we proceed always from objective reality rather than subjective desire” (Xi, 2015). For China’s leaders, this is more than a philosophical statement—it is an assumption about laws of international politics that have no place in Western Realist conceptions and drive China’s international behavior in very specific ways.

For example, these assumptions undergird Beijing’s embrace of the “Belt and Road” as an aspect of its international strategy. While most outside observers primarily perceive China’s robust economic linkages with the major economies of the world as leverage that can be (and is) used by Beijing as a coercive tool to achieve geopolitical ends, for Beijing there is also a positive, attractive aspect to such linkages. Since Beijing embraces a materialist view of the world, China’s leaders believe that closer economic relationships will gradually lead to closer ideological alignment. We therefore come to the acme of China’s approach to foreign policy: While Beijing is increasingly comfortable with the use of coercion and military threats to achieve its ends (deterrence), it would much rather build relationships that encourage countries to naturally and willingly oblige the interests of the CCP (deference).

The second aspect of dialectical materialism that is critical to understand in this context is the dialectic itself—the belief that the state of the world is in constant flux, and that strategy must reflect the realities of that change. Xi’s view of world trends builds on his predecessor Hu Jintao’s assessment that “peace and development remain the underlying trends of our time” (Hu, 2012). While Xi has continued to reaffirm this assessment despite the downturn in the US-China relationship, he has added two trends of his time: increasing multipolarity produced by the rise of the developing world and ever-growing economic integration produced by globalization (Greer, 2020). Together, as described by Sinologist Coby Goldberg, “these two trends form an inexorable movement that countries can either participate in and benefit or reject to the detriment of all.”

These facets of China’s views on foreign policy are critically important to understanding China’s approach to competition with the United States. For Beijing, this competition is not a strategic choice but rather the inevitable outgrowth of natural laws of reality that are inexorable and unavoidable. This viewpoint also explains China’s use of economic engagement as a core element of its approach to foreign policy, and its use of coercion (but not force) to achieve its ends. Finally, it explains the forces Beijing believes are at play within this competition: US-China competition perceived as both the collision of two major powers with conflicting national interests, and as a reflection of a natural, world-historical process, triggered by inherent contradictions in the international system. From Beijing’s perspective, the United States is trying to hold back the historic tides of multipolarity and globalization, bringing an end to the era of peace and development that has enabled China’s remarkable economic development.

## Prospects for Conflict

Beijing assumes that Washington will do everything it can to retain its dominant position. The China's leaders therefore believe that they must pursue a strategy to maximize China's comprehensive national power, while circumscribing the power and influence of the United States in areas of importance for the CCP. China, therefore, is competing with the United States over both power and order. Power in the sense of raw calculations of military, political, and economic might and order in terms of the future direction of the international laws, norms, and institutions that shape how states interact with one another and address disputes. For Beijing, regional order reflects the regional distribution of power; by building national power, China's leaders therefore expect the regional order to evolve to reflect Beijing's interests and priorities.

China's leaders do not accept the strict distinctions between war and peace that are broadly accepted in international law and across much of the international community. Instead, they generally see a broad continuum of relations between major powers in which tension, turbulence, incidents, and even conflict are seen as natural and normal tools to be used in an international system that is fundamentally competitive. Yet China's leaders also realize a major conflict with the United States would imperil China's economic development and generate domestic unrest, potentially threatening the continued leadership of the CCP itself. Beijing has therefore embraced a strategy that, while not ruling out the possibility of conflict, seeks to achieve China's objectives without resorting to engaging in a direct and potentially devastating conflict with the United States. The question for outside observers is therefore clear: How long will China's "peace and development" approach last?

A major source of concern for many American strategists looking at major power competition today is the potential for smaller incidents—either intentional or accidental—to escalate into a broad, devastating conflict. Yet these concerns are primarily rooted in US Cold War experience; especially the Cuban Missile Crisis and long-standing tensions over Berlin. As China does not share this historical experience, its military leaders are not nearly as concerned about such incidents as the United States. Indeed, Chinese military writers assume that advancements in military technologies and the appropriate applications of principles and philosophies can mitigate escalatory tendencies (Laird, 2017). Moreover, Chinese strategists often write about escalation and de-escalation at the conventional level as entirely predictable and controllable (despite significant historical evidence to the contrary) and view such incidents as useful tools to demonstrate resolve and coerce. Hoping for a calm and incident-free relationship with China is, therefore, likely a fool's errand. Beijing views such incidents as useful geopolitical tools and the natural result of competition.

A more likely source of conflict, however, would result from a changing view among China's leaders about the broader trends of the time. The Marxist dialectic provides a clear way for China to change its broader approach to foreign policy, explaining the CCP's long-held ideological flexibility. As described by Goldberg:

Material conditions might at one time dictate that the CCP must eradicate the capitalist class as it attempted under Mao Tse-tung, and the next year lead the CCP to welcome entrepreneurs into its ranks as members it officially did in the 1990s. Material conditions could make the United States the enemy in the 1950s, and a partner in the 1970s. The dialect effects such changes. 'Objective reality is not fixed, but rather develops and changes all the time. Change is the most natural thing in the world,' Xi told Party members. 'If we cling to our perception of China's realities as they were in the past without adjustment, we will find it difficult to move forward' (Goldberg, 2020; Xi, 2019).

If China's leaders no longer believe that peace and development can be accomplished through multipolarity and globalization, a more explicit embrace of the use of force may result. What, therefore, may drive Xi to perceive a change in the underlying dialectical circumstances?

While no one can reliably predict the thought processes of any individual, one should expect Xi's calculations to be based on his assessment of China's material assets and power relative to the rest of the world, including the United States. Trends China's leaders view as counter to globalization (de-coupling and economic realignment away from China), multilateralism (the US and the West reasserting leadership in international institutions), peace (the realignment of US military forces in the Indo-Pacific or the use of force by the United States counter to Chinese interests), and development (a significant and uncontrolled downturn in the Chinese economy) could all drive Xi to reevaluate his approach to foreign affairs.

Ultimately, China's leaders today are confident that China is on the rise, and the United States is on a gradual but inevitable decline. Sustained confidence in China's rising economic, political, and military might—as well as the continued perceived advancement of China's national interests—are likely to drive Beijing to remain on its current course. Yet, should Beijing lose confidence in China's rise and believe that geopolitical trends are no longer on China's side, expect significant changes in China's strategic approach to competition with the United States.

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## Chapter 5. China's Global Governance Ambitions: Challenges and Opportunities for US-China Relations

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### Abstract

*Chinese leaders are ramping up their ambitions for reshaping the international order. President Xi Jinping is calling for his country to lead the reform of the global governance system. This chapter provides an assessment of China's ongoing effort at expanding its role in global governance spheres by dissecting its rationale and strategy. In conclusion, it discusses the implications of these efforts pertaining to US-China relations.*

### Biding Its Time No More: China Strives for More Leadership Roles in Global Governance

The idea that US-China relations have entered a new era of strategic competition has taken hold in both Washington and Beijing. Officially, the Chinese government still strives for "coordination, cooperation, and stability" (Wang, 2019) in its relationship with the US and has not adopted the term "strategic competition," but in practice it has already taken steps to brace for this undesirable scenario (Xinhua, 2020). Fierce competitions with the US in selected areas of global governance are well underway.

As early as the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) 18th Party Congress, first convened in November 2012, President Xi Jinping called for China's greater participation in the global governance system—the set of rules, institutions, and enforcement mechanisms the global community uses to solve collective problems. In his November 2014 speech at the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs, Xi stated that China would "work to reform the international system and global governance" but carefully avoided calling for China to play a leading role (Xinhua, 2014). Starting in June 2018, however, in the context of the surging anti-globalist populism in the West and the US retreat from global leadership, Xi stepped up from his previous rhetoric by calling for China to "take an active part in leading the reform of the global governance system" (Xinhua, 2018). Xi's vision marks a decisive shift from the approach captured in Deng Xiaoping's famous ethos that China should hide its capabilities and bide its time.

## Rationale for China's Push for Global Governance Leadership

### The Quest for Great Power Status

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, generations of Chinese leaders have sought to return the nation to its former great power status. China's quest is further reinforced by the historic narrative that its standing was unjustifiably lost in what is known as the "Century of Humiliation," stretching from defeat at the hands of the British in the First Opium War up to the proclamation of the People's Republic by Mao Zedong in 1949. As China's leading international relations (IR) scholar, Yan Xuetong (2001) makes clear, "the Chinese regard their rise as regaining China's lost international status rather than as obtaining something new." At the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, President Xi Jinping spelled out his vision to transform China into a global power "moving closer to center stage" in unprecedented clarity (Xinhua, 2017). In his widely publicized concept "Chinese dream," national rejuvenation—restoring China's previous standing as a great power—is a crucial element. In practice, Chinese leaders view the global governance system as a direct outcome of great power competition. Powerful nations design global institutions, rules, and norms to advance their own national interests. The existing system, often referred to as the Liberal International Order (LIO), was designed by and a reflection of the US and other Western nations in an era when China was a much weaker power. Now a major global economic and political power, Beijing expects to be consulted on important global and regional issues by other members of the "great powers club" and the privilege to shape and make rules for regional and/or international institutions.

### Changing Power Balance and US Retreat From Global Governance Leadership

Chinese observers view the 2008–2009 global financial crisis as the first major shift in global power in China's favor. Having weathered the crisis much better than Western economies, many in Beijing were convinced that the Chinese state-led model is superior. This triumphalist sentiment further led to a popular view that the global power balance had just passed an inflection point at which the United States was declining and China was ascending. After the financial crisis, Beijing began to lean in and play a stronger role in selected transnational issues such as global climate change, but they were careful to avoid leaning in too far. Beijing perceived another major power shift in 2016 and 2017 when the United Kingdom voted to exit the European Union (EU) and Donald Trump became the US president. Both events were perceived as further evidence that the world's oldest and most powerful democracies were beginning to stumble. Chinese analysts began to argue that US withdrawal from global leadership was creating a shortfall in global governance, making it harder to address collective challenges, thus generating demand for China to step up and fill the gap. A flurry of Chinese initiatives/actions ensued, covering a much wider range of global/regional issues including human rights, cyber governance, international trade/finance, etc.

## Ideological Offense to Preserve Regime Security

China's political elites consider the United States to have persistently pursued the goals of challenging the legitimacy of Communist Party leadership, undermining China's social stability, and supporting separatist forces (Wang, 2019). Beijing believes that during the Trump Administration, the US stepped up its sabotaging efforts: The trade war, ideological attacks, and other anti-China activities were interpreted as being driven by a grand strategy to derail China's national development and rejuvenation (Wang, 2019; Da, 2019; Jie, 2020). Rather than playing defense, China started pushing back in the global governance space. In Beijing's view, Western countries insisted on liberal values—particularly freedom, democracy, and human rights—as the ideological bedrock of the existing international order, harboring the strategic intent that enmeshing illiberal states (e.g., China and Russia) in this order will eventually liberalize them in the West's own image. Beijing thus perceives these Western values embedded in the LIO as a fundamental security threat and believes that countries can act by the rules underpinning the international order without having to alter their own domestic political and economic systems to mirror Western models. As China becomes more powerful, Beijing believes that the ideological/value principles of the international order should be “democratized” to incorporate the ideas and priorities of “illiberal” countries like China.

## Explaining Chinese Strategy in Global Governance

China's shift towards a more proactive approach in global governance triggered an upsurge in US media and policy characterization of China as a challenger to the existing rule-based international order (Johnston, 2019). The most notable examples include references to China, in the 2017 and 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy respectively, as a “revisionist” power, along with Russia, that intends to reshape the existing international order in its own authoritarian image. Theory-driven scholarly analysis of China's international behavior, however, paints a more complex picture: Instead of an all-out assault on the LIO, China's policies vis-à-vis global governance are issue/domain dependent. The below three models provide respective explanations.

### Social Identity Model

A number of IR studies draw upon Social Identity Theory (SIT) to explain China's foreign policy behavior in the global arena (Larson & Shevchenko, 2019; Yang, 2020). SIT holds that when a state is unsatisfied with its identity or feels it is threatened, it may pursue several identity management strategies: improving its status by joining elite clubs (“social mobility”), trying to best the dominant states (“social competition”), or achieving preeminence outside the arena of geopolitical competition (“social creativity”). China utilizes all three strategies laid out in SIT (Yang, 2020). As the world's second largest economy, China is heavily dependent on the global system. It is in China's interest to work collaboratively with other nations to address common challenges such as climate change, terrorism, pandemic disease, nuclear proliferation, and financial crises that threaten global security and prosperity. Sharing common interests with the US and other Western liberal democracies, China has therefore been a constructive

supporter of relevant international rules and norms. These are also institutions that welcome China's participation, without which major global challenges would be impossible to solve. Therefore, for issues where China's interests are aligned with the existing order and where existing stakeholders welcome are welcoming, China is likely to follow the social mobility strategy, striving to "join the club" and become a contributing member. Other areas of global governance where Western liberal democratic norms promote universal values such as freedom, human rights, and democracy pose unique political challenges for China. Beijing perceives them as politically threatening and does not intend to comply with such norms. In these areas, Beijing strives to alter established norms by injecting, legitimizing, and promoting its own values; finding ample allies, particularly among developing countries, to support its narratives; and carving out its own niche area. This corresponds to a strategy of social creativity. Finally, there are new areas of global governance crucial to China's interests (e.g., Internet governance) without established norms yet. For such cases, social competition strategy will be pursued, and China will compete with other actors to ensure any norms or rules established will reflect China's values and interests.

### Opportunistic Multilateralism Model

Kastner et al. (2020) also observe that China's strategy in global governance varies widely by issue area. China sometimes sits on the sidelines of multilateral efforts at cooperation (e.g., China's approach to the international nuclear nonproliferation regime), or even holds up cooperation in order to extort a more favorable bargain for itself (e.g., China's action during the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Change Conference). However, at other times China has been willing to play a leadership role, sacrificing its other objectives for the sake of general agreement (e.g., China's leadership role in establishing the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank). How, then, does Beijing choose among these different approaches? Kastner et al. (2020) focus on two explanatory variables. First, how strong are China's outside options? That is, if China chooses not to contribute to cooperative efforts in some issue area, what is its government's expectation about whether other powers, like the US, will solve the problem in a way that suits Chinese interests? Second, to what extent do other powers view China's active participation as crucial to successful cooperation in some issue area? In other words, how indispensable is China? Taking into consideration these two factors, China is most likely to invest (be an "investor") in building effective international cooperation when its outside options are weak. In such circumstances, leaders in Beijing will recognize that sitting on the sidelines will either result in a problem that Beijing cares about going unresolved or being resolved in a way that undercuts its interests. When China's outside options are strong, then China's strategy hinges on the degree to which other stakeholders consider China an indispensable player in solving the pertinent problem. Specifically, when other powers view Chinese contributions as essential for sustaining multilateralism, China will have considerable bargaining power. Beijing will be in a position to demand concessions in exchange for its active participation (be a "spoiler"), just as the United States has done in the past with UNESCO, the World Bank, and even, under the Trump Administration, with NAFTA and NATO. Alternatively, when China is not seen as an indispensable player for a particular multilateral

regime to succeed, China is likely to free ride on American and other efforts to maintain regimes (be a “free rider”). Because the strategic landscape can vary across issues, China therefore will show constructive leadership on some issues even as it plays hold-up or free rides on other issues.

### Centrality-Heterogeneity Model

Weiss and Wallace (2021) observe that in global governance, China has behaved strategically, investing in reshaping or rejecting international arrangements in issue areas that are central to its domestic rule and being more willing to free ride or defer to international practices on issues that are more peripheral. To explain China’s strategy vis-à-vis global governance norms and rule, they propose a framework grounded in the domestic politics of authoritarian rule. In the model, two factors, centrality and heterogeneity, shape Beijing’s approach to various issues in the area of international order. Specifically, the more closely an international issue touches upon one or more of the central pillars of the regime’s rule (nationalism, economic development, etc.), the more Beijing will invest internationally in that issue and seek to reshape international rules/norms to its advantage. The greater the heterogeneity of domestic interests regarding an international issue (e.g., climate change or trade), the more Beijing will face competing demands from different subnational actors, thus resulting in offsetting policies and/or partial implementation at the national level regarding relevant global governance issues.

### Concluding Thoughts

Although the above three models present varying explanations for China’s actions in global governance arenas, some overlapping implications are clear. First, China’s global governance strategy is domain-dependent and is not engaging in an all-out assault on the LIO. Second, China’s choice of strategy is nuanced and depends on a combination of domestic and international political calculations. Third, China is not a supporter of the liberal international order as defined by the United States and other Western countries, but it is a major beneficiary and supporter of selected “liberal characteristics” (e.g., open, rule-based, and consent-based) of the international order. Hence, one should not reject any Chinese institution-building (e.g., AIIB) on the grounds of its illiberal domestic political system. Where China has an interest in credible multilateral regimes, it has supported and complied with norms and practices (e.g., shared governance and accountability) typical of the LIO (Kastner et al., 2020; Liang, 2020).

Chinese observers are very much concerned with the radical changes that have taken place in US- China policy since Donald Trump took the White House. The drastic transformation of Washington’s China policy is striking in both rhetoric and action and characterized by bipartisan consensus and a “whole-of-government” approach (Wang, 2019). From Beijing’s point of view, however, everything that the Chinese leadership has done, both domestically and internationally, is completely justified, as it serves the long-term goal of preserving the Communist Party’s rule, which in turn serves the interest of the whole Chinese nation.

Many in China have also observed that the escalating conflicts between China and the United States during the Trump administration have not yet led to economic separation and hence judged that the chances of a thorough decoupling remain slim moving forward (Da, 2019). While Trump's China policy revealed a consensus in Washington about ending the strategy of engaging Beijing, no consensus has been reached on a substitute strategy. For many Chinese elites, rivalry between China and the US is unlikely to become a cold war primarily because Chinese and American interests are so deeply intertwined that neither can afford the cost of long-term confrontation. In addition, Beijing sees the good old days for the US-led alliance system and the Western-dominated world as passed. One cannot simply assume that the policies of the EU and the US toward China will be in coordinated and in sync. With these calculations in mind, China sees itself remaining in a period of "strategic opportunities" for national development and power building. It will keep forging ahead with its global governance ambitions.

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## Chapter 6. An Approach to Managing the “Complex Adaptive System” That Is Peer Competition

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### Abstract

*Peer competition, or non-kinetic engagement with peer adversaries, has become the preferred norm for pursuing and, for the most part, achieving our adversaries’ national security objectives. The asymmetric advantages that our peer adversaries (most notably China and Russia) possess in their speed, more centralized decision authority across a broader range of PMESII dimensions, and willingness to coordinate those complex activities have proven an attractive alternative to a kinetic engagement with the US, where we would enjoy most of the asymmetric advantages. Thus, gray zone campaigns, though ancient in nature, have become increasingly dominant in world engagements. One catalyst to this trend is the exponential growth of worldwide media, most notably social media, which provide an accessible and increasingly effective attack surface to mobilize population sentiment and actions. A second major factor in the effectiveness of adversarial gray zone campaigns is our adversaries’ ability to directly manage and control activities that span multiple PMESII dimensions in much tighter and faster decision loops than those supported by US government organizations, processes, regulations, and practices.*

### Problem Description

This paper will argue that the nature of peer competition is in essence that of a complex adaptive system, and as such, insights and approaches from complexity management might be brought to bear in a multi-faceted game-theoretic treatment of peer competition to help address some of the asymmetric disadvantages that face the US.

### From Order to Chaos

Simple or *ordered* systems have comparatively few parts that behave according to very simple rules or laws, making their behavior, which is based on a given set of stimuli, relatively easy to understand and predict.

*Complicated* systems tend to have many parts, but each part plays a specific role in the overarching system. They are

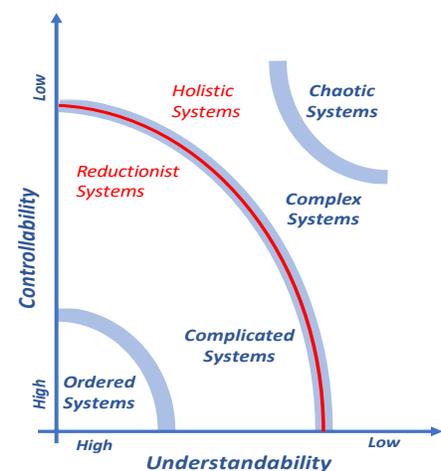


Figure 3: Relationship of System Complexity to Understandability and Controllability

guided by a potentially large but numerable set of rules, and their behavior, though complicated, can be understood and predicted. One aspect of complicated systems that makes them understandable is that they often are an amalgamation of subsystems with well-understood interactions and/or interfaces.

"*Complex systems* are systems whose behavior is intrinsically difficult to model due to the dependencies, competitions, relationships, or other types of interactions between their parts or between a given system and its environment. As Rickles et. al (2007) describe, systems that are "complex" have distinct properties that arise from these relationships, such as nonlinearity, emergence, spontaneous order, adaptation, and feedback loops, among others." *Complex adaptive* systems are a subcategory of complex systems that can respond, learn, or even change in system behavior based on internal changes or external stimuli. A human network is an example of a complex adaptive system.

*Chaotic systems* can have many or even very few interacting components, but they interact in such a way as to produce very intricate and non-linear dynamics. As Rickles et. al (2007) describes, "Small differences in initial conditions, such as those due to errors in measurements or due to rounding errors in numerical computation, can yield widely diverging outcomes for such dynamical systems, rendering long-term prediction of their behavior impossible in general." The proverbial butterfly flapping its wings in the Amazon and causing it to rain in Kansas is such an example.

Two related concepts worth introducing are those of reductionism vs. holism. Reductionism is related to both ordered and complex systems and is the process by which a system may be decomposed or subdivided into subsystems or elements that may be thought of as more-or-less self-contained components with well-defined and understandable inputs and outputs. Human nature drives us to try to understand the unknown or the unfamiliar using this process. By reducing elements of the unfamiliar to those that are known or similar and reducing the scope of those continued unknown elements for further analysis, one increases the scope of the understandable until the last element is understood. Those systems that are amenable to this process fall into the ordered or complicated system classification. Those systems that resist reductionism and require a holistic approach include: 1) complex systems—where the interdependencies, coupling, or entanglement of the elements are such that they resist subdivision and complete understanding; or 2) chaotic systems—where the nonlinearities and instabilities of the system make decomposition impossible.

In this paper, we posit, as others have, that peer competition fits most clearly into the sweet spot of a complex adaptive system (Vakili et. al, 2013)—not amenable to pure analysis and optimization as ordered or complicated systems might be, but not completely uncontrollable as chaotic systems tend to be. Further, as complex systems, elements within those systems (the adversaries) tend to learn, evolve, and adapt over time making peer competition a complex adaptive system.

## Peer Competition as a Complex Adaptive System

Beyerchen (1992) describes how Clausewitz used the German term *zweikampf*, literally a “two struggle,” to capture the notion of a contest between two opponents. The example Clausewitz uses is that of two wrestlers. This example suggests a struggle between complex, adaptive opponents; one in which the actions of each adversary continually challenge and shape those of the other, forcing each to adapt and respond in ways that neither could fully envision before stepping into the ring. The bodily positions and contortions that emerge in wrestling are often impossible to achieve without the contextual counterforce and counterweight of an opponent. Imagine the wrestlers above conducting their match on the deck of a ship at sea. Here, opportunistic shifts in the environment further complicate the assessment, computation, and strategic decisions of each wrestler. As noted above, and described in great detail with respect to effects-based operations by Smith (2006), context is what drives the changes, adaptation, and even learning that takes place in a complex adaptive system.

Dr. John Seely Brown characterizes the role of interacting with a complex adaptive system as “Designing for emergence in a white-water world” (Pendleton & Brown, 2018). He goes on to use the analogy of a white-water kayaker, whereby the kayaker has some level of control/effectors (his paddle), but his paddle can be a relatively minor influencer depending on the speed and characteristics of the everchanging water (world context and adversarial behavior impacts). Instead, the kayaker is continually looking ahead to try and understand what general changes in position might be advantageous to his future actions and try to navigate to those general positions. In essence, the kayaker is not making a stroke-by-stroke plan, but instead managing his position (relative context) over time; in the near-term, a stroke-by-stroke plan will emerge through this management process. However, while executing that local stroke-by-stroke plan, our kayaker is must also be managing that continued context shift. It is that rapid adaptation to that context switching that will ultimately determine if the kayaker is successful in navigating the contextual waterway. Essentially, it boils down to the simultaneous tactical and strategic semi-controlled navigation and manipulation of the context that is necessary.

In keeping with this analogy, the emergence of 24-7 news availability, social media and its ability to quickly mobilize populations and opinions, and the intertwining of international economics and relationships has led to increasing the speed and complexity of the “rapids” within which Peer Competition must be waged. Unfortunately, many of our adversaries, such as China and Russia, have shorter decision-making processes and fewer restrictions/constraints on their behaviors which allows our adversaries to be able to both navigate and more concerning—generate those rapids more effectively. The US must be able to counter that asymmetry with an improvement in the speed at which we can recognize them beginning to take shape and increasing the depth of our understanding of the implications that those rapids might entail.

## Ideas for Addressing Peer Competition as a Complex Adaptive System

Game-theoretic approaches have long been explored for addressing competition/adversary style analysis, prediction, and recommendation. Recently, computer poker-playing AI, based on a game-theory engine, was able to defeat championship poker players in competition reasoning with incomplete, imperfect data and providing recommendations on wagering – including strategic bluffing (Sandholm, 2020). Game Theory research has focused for the last

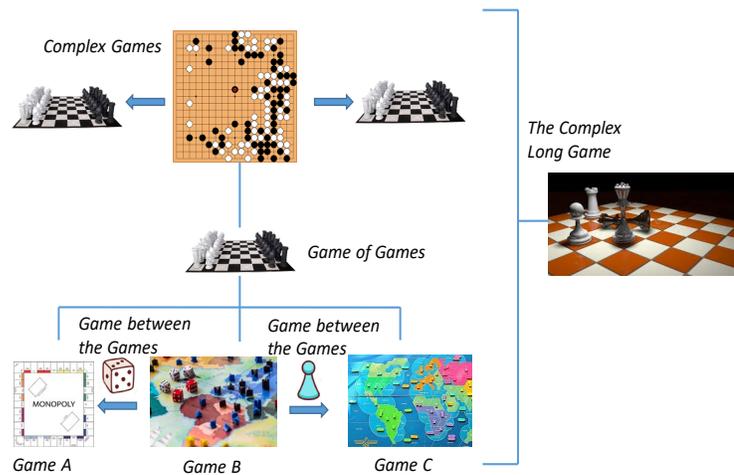


Figure 4: Campaign of Games Construct

decade on making strides in dealing with uncertain, incomplete, and imperfect information in non-turn-based competitive games as well. This progress, though significant and necessary, tends to be work reminiscent to the “blocks-world domain” simplification used in early AI-based planning. It tends to focus on specific fixed games with well-understood resources, movements, playing boards, and rules - even if the placement of pieces, adversary strategy, or view of the board is incomplete. The DoD has recently been investing in ways to increase the resilience of game-theoretic AI systems with programs such as the DARPA Science of Artificial Intelligence and Learning for Open-world Novelty (SAIL-ON) program (DARPA, n.d.), designed to develop AI that is resilient dynamic changes in games (new pieces, different piece movements, changes in board configurations, and even what it means to “win” a game); the DARPA Gamebreaker program (DARPA, 2020), which is investigating “game balance” and underlying parameters that might unbalance a game in a particular way so as to keep a game being played or conversely, to dominate that game; and the AFRL Stratagem program (SAM.GOV, n.d.), which is exploring new artificial intelligence-based capabilities that can reason in real time about developments in the battlespace during wartime engagements. However, these are but the first steps in moving toward the objective of developing AI that can truly support the breadth and complexity of peer competition.

The remainder of this section discusses additional perspectives on the use of game-theoretic approaches to dealing with Peer Competition. Figure 4 provides a composite of those elements described below as well as a notional layering of those capabilities. These approaches might help aid in deeper and earlier understanding and the countering of asymmetric advantages that adversaries such as China and Russia currently enjoy in peer competition.

## Game Between the Games

At present, peer competition across the PMESII spectrum—especially that being waged by the US—is primarily being waged in a more-or-less stove-piped manner. Those agencies or groups responsible for competing with our adversaries in each of the PMESII domains tend to focus on waging “their competition” within that domain with little, or at least informal, regard to implications that moves within their competition/game might have on the competitions/games being played in other stovepipes or with other adversaries in those stovepipes. As described in section 2 above, a reductionist (piecemeal) approach to dealing with a complex adaptive game is less than ideal, and a more holistic perspective must be adopted to begin to understand, adapt, and better manage that larger game. In so doing, understanding the implications of “game-to-game” implications/repercussions must be explored and codified, acknowledging, of course, the appropriate amount of uncertainty and ambiguity involved.

## Game of Games

Once the range of expected game-to-game interactions (across the PMESII spectrum) has been identified, it then becomes possible to begin to think more holistically about the competition space and even begin to develop the concept of a hierarchical layer(s) to a “game of games.” This allows the individual games/competitions to continue to be played in a more-or-less isolated manner but within a context of potential implications of cross-game gameplay at a higher/more strategic level.

Given the nature of democracy, and specifically the US government, laws and regulations tend to control or even prohibit tight coupling across many of the specific PMESII domains. Additionally, any human-coordinated decision making across these expansive stovepipes, even if permissible, adds to the complexity and latency for any action. This asymmetric advantage, enjoyed by adversaries whose control manifests in a very small group of individuals, allows the decision making and execution of broader and faster OODA (observe, orient, decide, and act) loops. This imposes a severe disadvantage since in any sustained competition or conflict, a key to success is the range of options that one can generate and the agility in moving from one potential option to the next.

A game-of-games approach would allow: 1) recognition and understanding of multi-dimensional games an adversary may be pursuing earlier in the process by aggregating evidence and “recognizing footsteps” across dimensions much earlier; 2) understanding of potential ramifications across stovepipes in advance of moves that we might make; and 3) opening up the potential for exploring our own multi-domain responses to adversarial moves. A broad and computational understanding of the likelihood of those changes/behaviors across those domains would allow for parametric exploration of a range of moves over a range of uncertainties/ambiguities to better understand the potential “terrain” of outcomes from a move.

For illustrative purposes, one might imagine a simplistic testbed of boardgames where AI-enabled game-theoretic analysis explores how what might be seen as a relatively minor move on a Monopoly gameboard with an adversary (the economic domain) might manifest a subsequent change in behavior on a Risk gameboard by that adversary (or his ally) of troop movements (the military domain), which further leads to undesirable changes in alliances on a Diplomacy gameboard (the diplomatic domain).

## Complex Games

While the above models might be conceptually sufficient for understanding and manipulating an ordered or complicated system, they cannot support the ambiguities and nonlinearities associated with complex systems. Even if one were able to develop models that were sufficiently detailed to fully represent these individual dimensions and their interactions, there remains the problem of calibration of those models to the real world and the current context in that world. And then there is the problem of the “rapids” of changing world context. One might argue that a type of “social Heisenberg uncertainty principle” exists in that one may not fully understand both the state of the world (calibration) and the direction of changes in that system at the same time. It is here that the white-water kayaker can provide some inspiration. In the way that our kayaker can recognize telltale features in the waterscape ahead (chutes, drops, eddies, holes, etc.), their use of that context can be used to generally position the kayak, within their limits, for what lies ahead. This “meta-strategy” interacts with the current tactical plan (stroke-by-stroke) to generate a near-term set of actions to deal with the threats currently faced, while projecting the needs to address future challenges in a dynamically emerging context. Thus, effective engagement with a complex adaptive system (such as peer competition) needs to be a harmonious blend of both “move, counter-move” and “context, counter-context” - making potential future contexts part of the reasoning process.

One could now imagine a “top-down” game, or even games, that meshes with the bottom-up hierarchical game structure described above (4.2) to work in tandem, improving the general “gameboard positions” as a priority over the current engagements. This layer elevates the game campaign from one dealing with complicated systems, to one effectively dealing with a complex adaptive system. It would have the ability to explore opportunities where losing a current battle might facilitate a future context better suited to eventually winning the war—or just more future critical battles, given that our peer competition is a never-ending state. A simple example would be that of a sacrifice in chess where giving up a piece on the board (that might not necessarily be lost) is used to

To truly take context into account in the current and future reasoning process, one must be able to recognize what constitutes the key elements of a particular engagement context, which will also be a dynamic set, but potentially drawn from a somewhat closed set of dimensions. The impact of a trade embargo with an adversary may seem a reasonable “move” to take in a given situation. However, the “reasonableness” of that move should only be assessed in the context of other current factors. If doing so would cause significant internal economic impact;

or further exacerbate a tense international military stalemate; or provide a second adversary an opening to improve their alignment with the first – the “reasonableness” of that move may be quite different. In addition, one must be able to assess the probable value/differential between two future contexts in terms of their potential benefits and risks to the future of the competition. These of course represent serious research challenges in and of themselves.

### Managing the Complex “Long Game”

Complexity theory argues that a complex adaptive opponent may be expected to pursue a particular line of action only while it appears that his strategy will yield a desired result. One would expect that the opponent will adapt to a setback, or even the prospect of such a future negative situation, by switching to a new course of action. This process would then continue from one move or engagement to the next, until either one of these courses of action succeeds, or the opponent runs out of further options because he has exhausted all the capabilities or options in his playbook, or because he can no longer generate new “good” options with the resources available. At this point, the game may become unstable as the adversary considers changes in the rules of the game—potential escalation.

Should research advance to the point where our ability to outmaneuver and overpower the adversary in the peer competition space equals or exceeds our ability to do so on the kinetic battlefield, we may find our adversary resorting or escalating to another dimension, scale, location, pace, kinetics, etc. to “change the game” in a way that might favor his position, resources, tactics, etc. At this point, we may find ourselves playing a game that we are unfamiliar or ill-prepared for, or playing for stakes we are not prepared to lose.

As such, we may find ourselves in a position similar to that in which the Allies found themselves in World War II with the breaking of the Enigma code. We would have the ability to completely dominate the gameboard, but in doing so, we would be sending a signal and incentivizing our opponents to “change the game.”

At this level, the “long game” is played, not based on moves, but based on outcomes of the battles waged while the objective of the game is to keep the game going. Should the opponent reach the point where they feel there is no benefit to continue playing the game, our adversary would want to change the game being played in a way that further favors his position or at least changes the status quo.

So, while kinetic engagements are meant to be won and be put to an end, peer competition is ever-present and meant in general to be continually played. As such, a new “game” can be contemplated—designed with the objective of keeping our adversaries from abandoning the game(s) that we might have potential (but hidden) abilities to dominate and deter them from changing the game and/or escalating in new and unpredictable ways. This might require losses or setbacks in our peer competition that might be avoidable on our side but in return keep a sense of progress with our adversaries so as to “keep them at the table” and continuing to play the game(s) that we ultimately have more control over to win when most needed and

avoid potential, unpredictable escalation by our adversary. In the case of our peer adversaries, such as China, they are already quite skilled in this “long game”. Our understanding of their longer-term meta-strategies and current (and anticipated) dominance in specific areas and capabilities (energy, AI, communications, etc.) and what those would enable is critical to the US not being outmaneuvered in a game that we may not fully understand that we have been playing until the game outcome has already been determined.

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## Chapter 7. One Belt, One Movie: China's Campaign to Cancel America's Cultural Dominance and Assert Alternate Narratives

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### Abstract

*The Communist Party of China (CCP) is pursuing a coordinated strategy to accumulate and project soft power to complement its hard power assets (deLisle, 2020). The replacement of American and Western cultural influences with CCP-sanctioned themes and narratives appears to be central to this strategy, from our perspective. One focus of this strategy is the global movie and media industry, which constitutes a primary input to values assimilation in most cultures, especially in the adolescent and 17- to 24-year old demographic sectors. In this essay, we consider the scope and purpose of the movie and media aspects of the CCP's soft power crusade and present options for countering it.*

*We argue that America needs a dedicated center of excellence to better understand soft power and its expression through hostile media influence operations. This new center for soft power strategies would apply multidisciplinary expertise to develop counter narratives that reinforce American and Western notions of democracy, human rights, free enterprise, and individual freedom. The center would be a public-private partnership that combines knowledge of movies, art, social media, finance, intelligence, and psychological operations to craft effective communications in support of US policy objectives.*

### Hurt Feelings: Reconciling a Century of Humiliation

The Communist Party of China (CCP) appears to be engaged in a concerted effort to avenge perceived historic insults to China while projecting a new narrative that their brand of communism and authoritarian rule is the best option for the Chinese people and for the world. The perceived insults stem mainly from Western colonial exploitation of China during periods of weakness, primarily during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. While military power is a top priority for asserting China's new role as a global power, the CCP is emphasizing the importance of so-called soft power as an essential component of its new global role. So-called soft power includes a wide range of non-military instruments that can be used to advance national interests, the foremost of which are economic and cultural in nature. Soft power complements

the CCP's growing military, scientific, and economic power by providing a narrative in which the CCP is leading China and the world away from a supposedly unjust and crumbling American-led global order to a new era marked by Chinese leadership and values.

We argue that China's leaders are implementing plans to cultivate favorable images that support their aspirations to offer alternatives to the history and cultures that have been the hallmark of modern democracies across the globe. A revised global order would highlight favorable images of China's history, culture, and current leadership.



Image 1: Colonial Insults and Hollywood Stereotypes Are the Target of the CCP's Media Campaign

For CCP leaders, soft power includes cultural influences that project China, communism, and totalitarian rule in a positive light. Specifically, the party's leadership conducts information and disinformation operations to achieve two main objectives (Tromblay, 2017). First, the CCP wants to eliminate what it considers to be offending Western media images representing China. This includes negative portrayals of Chinese characters and Chinese government actions in media, especially in films and television. Of particular concern is the story of Japan's invasion of China in the 1930s, the Chinese civil war that resulted in the establishment of the Republic of China on Taiwan, the Cultural Revolution, and any dissent that calls into question the legitimacy of the CCP. Other controversial topics include Tibet, the treatment of the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang province, and anything negative about Xi Jinping. Moreover, censorship of China's response to the COVID-19 outbreak and intimidation of journalists attempting to cover the pandemic illustrate the CCP's sensitivity to criticism and efforts to manipulate media reporting (Wang, 2020).



Image 2: Banned in China: Winnie the Pooh and South Park

To remove undesirable images, China launched a multi-pronged global campaign to censor and control influential media outlets (Xu & Albert, 2017). The censorship portion of the campaign consists of conventional methods, such as blocking internet content and expelling foreign journalists. Beijing's new Great Wall and exported influence seek to prevent Chinese (and world) citizens from viewing offensive and "subversive" ideas—such as noting and banning the similarity between Xi Jinping and Winnie the Pooh (Haas, 2018) and outlawing the cartoon satire, *South Park* for lampooning China's censorship (Brzeski & Parker, 2019). China's conventional censorship methods also block access to Google, YouTube, and Netflix, although many Chinese viewers reportedly find ways to circumvent the barriers (Li, 2021).

The censorship strategy involves the replacement of iconic images of American exceptionalism with new images of Chinese dominance. Examples of such Chinese-financed heroism include movies such as the *Ip Man* series, *The Martian*, *Transformers*, *The Meg*, *Midway*, and of course, Disney's *Mulan*.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond conventional censorship methods, the CCP soft power campaign seeks to change the narrative about China and its history by replacing unwelcomed images with new synthetic narratives that depict Chinese history, culture, and leadership in heroic terms. To remove unflattering images, Chinese media moguls loyal to the CCP have purchased controlling interest in key Hollywood studios and theater chains (Pressberg, 2016).



Image 3: A Black Hero Was Minimized in Star Wars Advertising and Dropped From a Perfume Promotion

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<sup>4</sup> *Ip Man* dispenses kung fu justice for foreign insults. In *Midway*, Doolittle Raiders are rescued by Chinese villagers, who are persecuted by Japanese invaders. *The Meg* is about Silicon Valley capitalists who cause the release of monster shark, which is dispatched by brilliant Chinese scientists. *The Martian* is about a stranded American astronaut who is rescued from US incompetence by an intrepid Chinese space program. Disney's *Mulan* projects CCP messaging of vanquishing invaders and even includes a Huawei logo reference. In *Transformers*, the Chinese government saves the world from space monsters.

By controlling the financing, content, and distribution of movies, China is able to censor stories and images deemed undesirable to CCP strategic objectives. Examples of CCP influence on movie content include the removal of the Taiwan and Japanese flags from Tom Cruise's jacket in the recent *Top Gun* movie, the removal of China and substitution of North Korea as the villain in the latest *Red Dawn* movie, the removal of the American flag from a film about the Apollo moon mission, and the shrinking of the image of a key black character from *Star Wars* advertising to appease racial prejudice in China (Lanyon, 2019). The black *Star Wars* character was also replaced by a Chinese actor in a promotional film for an international perfume brand (Khatchaturian, 2015; Elan, 2020). Dependence on Chinese financing gives Hollywood little choice but to cater to Chinese nationalist sensitivities. Moreover, leveraging access to the Chinese movie-going market remains an essential element for financial success in Hollywood (Voytko, 2020).

The new narratives being projected as part of China's soft power strategy attempt to recast perceived historic injustices perpetrated on the Middle Kingdom. The goal is to exempt Chinese citizens from negative reporting on China's domestic and foreign transgressions, and it offers a new and exciting image of a prosperous, powerful, and respected Chinese nation. All of this is concurrent with the portrayal of Americans and westerners overall as obese, arrogant, greedy, selfish, hapless



Image 4: Top Gun Partner Nation Flags Removed

invaders. In 2021, moving beyond a comprehensive and global weaponized journalism initiative, the CCP is actively attacking the personal lives of western political figures that dare to assert truth and messages that conflict with the party line of the CCP (Chen & Fan, 2020). Sanctions on named individuals prohibit travel in China, as well as doing any form of business with China or companies associated with the Chinese government. Even revered Chinese billionaires who dare criticize Beijing are subject to harsh penalties (McGregor, 2021).

The CCP media and information strategy will likely adapt to the effects of COVID-19, wherein theatrical film release shifts to streaming and alternate digital distribution (i.e., games, social platforms, and self-disclosure mobile apps, such as TikTok). Additionally, their influence over financing will likely continue to expand, as access to the Chinese domestic movie-going public remains a powerful incentive to accommodate Chinese demands.

## Beyond Hollywood: Other Media and Academic Components of China’s Soft Power Campaign

Beyond Hollywood, China is investing in iconic sports, entertainment, and other global cultural institutions. Examples include a growing relationship with the National Basketball Association (NBA), which censored player and coach criticism of the CCP crackdown in Hong Kong, and the purchase of Legendary Entertainment Group, which produces films based on global franchises, like *Pokémon*, *SpongeBob Squarepants*, *King Kong*, and *Godzilla*. Legendary is also currently at work on a recasting of the science fiction epic *Dune*, reportedly as a metaphor for the collapse of capitalism. The gaming industry is also a target of Chinese control and censorship, illustrated by news that the largest Chinese gaming company, Tencent, was feeding Chinese player communications to the government for surveillance and censorship purposes (Lin & Chin, 2017; Kharpal, 2021).



Image 5: Tough Choices for Companies

New media outlets, such as Tik Tok, What’sApp, Zoom, and WeChat, offer portals into foreign markets that can be monitored and controlled inside China’s Firewall. The result is a dramatic new development in the prosecution of soft power war, which is the fusion of tech substrates (networks and devices) and content. The former provides a vehicle for distribution, collection, and surveillance, while the latter offers surgical strike influence operations.

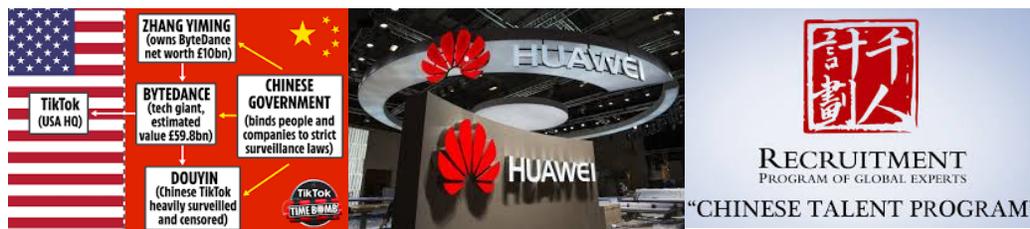


Image 6: Influence Operations Come in Many Forms

American universities are also a priority for Chinese influence and espionage operations. The international network of Confucius Institutes established to promote Chinese language and culture at American universities was exposed and ultimately shut down after the FBI warned of its ulterior motives of recruitment for espionage and surveillance of Chinese nationals studying abroad (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2019).

Finally, the PRC's Thousand Talents program, which offers financial support and luxury travel to American scientists of Chinese heritage, has been revealed by the FBI to be a recruitment platform to steal intellectual property ("Securing the U.S.," 2019). When combined, Beijing's initiatives to influence traditional and new media outlets and to exploit American educational institutions represent a powerful suite of instruments with which to exercise Chinese soft power. In our view, the CCP soft power challenge to American media, business, and education is gaining momentum.

## Between Hard and Soft Power: Competing in the Gray Zone

*"...The US has American style democracy, and China has Chinese style democracy."*

- Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, speaking to U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken at the Alaska Diplomatic Talks, March 2021

Between hard and soft power, the gray zone consists of measures short of war but intended to grow China's power and diminish that of potential adversaries. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is especially adept in cyber operations, including hacking, espionage, surveillance, propaganda, disinformation, and other innovations that feed and support all aspects of China's quest for power (Zhang, 2020). As each side of the yin-yang symbol has a bit of its opposite, hard and soft power are integrated pieces of the whole. The term for this unrestricted soft power warfare model at the CCP is "Military-Civil Fusion." China's soft power media campaign is a reciprocal component of China's military rise (Stone & Singer, 2021). While the espionage and gray zone aspects appear to be succeeding in building Chinese power, and censorship does restrict Chinese citizens from being exposed to unwelcome ideas, the US has failed to recognize this gap in its own national security arsenal.

It is important to understand the economic scale of the CCP's strategic moves in the soft power domain. It spent \$3.5 billion cash on the acquisition of Legendary Entertainment (Fritz & Burkitt, 2016). It spent \$2.6 billion to acquire AMC movie theaters (Pressberg, 2016). These and several other major expenditures can be measured on the scale of major US investments in military-kinetic weaponry. And yet, the CCP is spending at this scale in the domain of "hearts and minds," while the US has no such strategic vehicle.

## An American Soft Power Strategy

The United States is not competing effectively to counter China's soft power offensive. Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates noted in a December op-ed that in 2000, China committed \$7 billion to expand China's media influence capabilities, just as Congress abolished the US Information Agency (USIA), a key element of our Cold War strategy (Gates, 2020). Twenty years later, China is challenging American dominance in media, economy, and technology and promoting narratives to support its accomplishments. We need a coordinated media communications strategy to promote American perspectives and values. As China, Russia, and others are working to dismantle the international system based on the liberal concepts of

freedom and democracy, the US should counter Beijing's assault with a media and communications strategy designed to train a new generation of media experts to create, produce, finance, and distribute high quality information and entertainment to counter false narratives and reflect America's true interests and values.

We propose a unique public-private partnership focused on soft power. Rather than a dispersed and virtual strategy, a centralized center of excellence would be the home for initiatives to collect, analyze, plan, and execute a coordinated soft power strategy. The center would house efforts to study foreign influence operations and disinformation techniques and advance understanding of how culture shapes public perceptions. A major focus would be on the business side of media, entertainment, and technology investment and how those businesses shape national perceptions. Such perceptions are especially important for democratic countries that depend on public support for government policies. Such an idea is not beyond the realm of historical precedent. In the WWII era, the Walt Disney Company engaged with the US government (USG) for purposes of content creation and distribution in the service of the national interest.

The center would be staffed by representatives from all relevant branches of government in partnership with experts from Hollywood, Silicon Valley, and Wall Street. The projects would employ advanced technologies to produce movies, games, social media, and exhibitions to open communication between peoples and nations with confidence in the attractiveness of the democratic values of freedom, justice, and equality.

From an operational standpoint, this concept establishes a modernized version of NGO-USG partnership structures, wherein the Global Engagement Center and legacy models like the USIA are supercharged by private sector talents and workflows. The working concept for this entity, the National Center for Soft Power Strategies (NCSPS™), is in the early stages of instantiation at Marshall Monroe Magic, a private studio founded by one of this chapter's authors. At scale, the NCSPS could be analogous to the In-Q-Tel capital fund, seeding some concepts with venture partners and taking others to full production. The activities are a unique blending of high-level public diplomacy, policy study, content concept development across all media forms (including eSports and games), and exploratory early-stage tech investment in strategic platform systems. The key, as we see it, is for the new entity to have the freedom to create, innovate, and build a new era of global alliances, all within a strategic set of objectives around promoting western values. This entity could include a bridge to a private equity fund, bundled as an impact-focused investment enterprise. This investment enterprise branch of the NCSPS would pursue return on capital alongside the messaging of western values.

The central content initiative for the NCSPS, which we are calling, "Story Wars," consists of advanced ideas that not only celebrate western values but point the way and illuminate a path toward a future filled with freedom and liberty across the globe, instead of one in which authoritarianism is accepted as a legitimate alternative.

It is important to emphasize that the NCSPS must have a significant international alliance building function in the world. And this alliance network will need to have partners and allies that go beyond the US-UK-Canada-Australia-New Zealand FVEYs partners. We must endeavor to build synergies with all democracies and aspiring democracies in the world, finding points of joint action with countries throughout Asia, Africa, South America, and Eastern Europe. This historic alignment and collaboration vision is something we call the Free World Federation. Our expectation is that the world is thirsty for such narratives and will gladly contribute their own cultural and creative legacies to a combined effort.

## Conclusion

As CCP influence warfare operations bombard the US and its allies, the US response has been lackluster, relying on past glories from a different era. The USIA had an annual budget in the \$1 billion range in 1999 when it was abandoned. We believe a commitment multiple times that size is warranted for this new engagement, incorporating innovative public-private financing models to create exciting, attractive, and innovative forms of entertainment that project the best of American culture. The soft power threat is real, and we must not miss this opportunity to stand up for what we know to be true and right for future generations.

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## Chapter 8. Cyber Competition With China: A Regional Approach

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### Abstract

*The US-China competitive relationship manifests in cyberspace as a contest for access and information. For the United States to maintain initiative in this contest, its strategy must account for key features of cyber operations: how they yield advantage through cumulative gains rather than individual operations, rely on deception, and serve poorly for coercion or signaling. US cyber strategy should also take advantage of US competitive advantages. A regional cyber pact with Asian allies both suits the nature of cyber competition and builds on a unique American asset via its alliance system.*

### Introduction

The United States and China are engaged in a cyber competition. Both states are racing to develop access to each other's networks and systems and exploit those accesses, mainly to spy but occasionally to sabotage and subvert. Both states are also vying to deny the other access to their own networks and systems. But while these cyber tactics are common to both China and the United States, the term competition can be misleading—after all, competition implies shared objectives or goals among actors.

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At the highest level, the two states are using cyber means to support very different political ends. China aims to ensure the continued rule of the Chinese Communist Party through domestic stability and economic growth, while developing a world-class military, advanced economy, and regional influence commensurate to its perceived status. The United States, in contrast, seeks to maintain the international status quo. It therefore seeks fundamentally conservative goals, though ones that require active investment and innovation to maintain: a globally competitive economy, a military capable of fulfilling commitments to allies, and maintenance of the regional balance of power in the Indo-Pacific. The two states also hold distinct visions of what cyberspace itself should be: a patchwork of walled-off fiefdoms administered by national governments versus a single, open Internet where states share governance with civil society and business.

Because the United States and China pursue asymmetric political ends in cyber competition, the United States should not pursue a symmetric cyber strategy. Strategies that seek to compete purely, in turn, to “out-China China” or to justify bad US behavior by comparing it to worse Chinese behavior suffer from an analytical deficiency—they are dictated more by the actions of an external adversary than any positive desired end state. Better strategies are those that present an affirmative vision grounded in American principles and utilize unique American advantages.

One such advantage, oft-discussed in national security circles but underdiscussed in the cyber context, lies in the network of US allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region. These states cooperate with the United States on more traditional security matters, share certain democratic and Internet governance principles, and now face a shared cyber threat from China. This shared threat could be mitigated through formalized regional cyber cooperation encompassing intelligence sharing, joint cyber operations, and defensive capacity-building.

## Strategy in Cyber Competition

Scholars and US policymakers have recently come to agree on a key aspect of cyber competition: It is exceedingly difficult to change a state’s decision-making through cyber operations alone. States primarily use the cyber domain to achieve gains directly, rather than shaping other states’ calculations and perceptions (Fischerkeller & Harknett, 2017; Nakasone, 2019; Rid, 2012; U.S. Cyber Command, 2020; Valeriano & Maness, 2015). These gains range from gleaning intelligence to disrupting a weapons system, but yield benefits through their first-order effects rather than second- or third-order coercive influence. As James Lewis discusses in the preceding paper in this series, coercion theory concepts like deterrence and compellence therefore fail to capture much about cyber capabilities that are constantly in use and reliant on secrecy.

In practice, this means that US cyber policy should aim to thwart Chinese cyber activity, not shape Chinese decision-making. Intending the latter would expect something of cyber operations they have historically failed to deliver. This premise diverges significantly from that of nuclear or conventional deterrence, which uses the threat of force to alter an adversary’s

cost-benefit calculus. But consider for a moment whether China, or any other state, could convince US leadership to alter the key ends, ways, or means of US foreign policy through cyber means alone.

The problem is not a lack of offensive capability. More fearsome cyber capabilities would not necessarily yield new coercive leverage. Jason Healey (2019) points out that “after Stuxnet and the Snowden revelations, what adversaries can possibly doubt the power of U.S. cyber capabilities?”. Instead, the nature of cyber competition—its constant contact, pervasive deception, and shifting terrain—means that cyber capabilities provide utility through their use rather than their brandishing or mere possession (Fischerkeller & Harknett, 2017; Gartzke & Lindsay, 2015).

Chinese analysts generally agree with their American counterparts that cyber operations can achieve strategic ends without rising to the level of armed conflict. Unsurprisingly, they diverge in their perceptions of the US-China cyber relationship. Where the 2018 Department of Defense Cyber Strategy states that Russia and China have “expanded [strategic] competition to include persistent campaigns in and through cyberspace,” Chinese analysts perceive the United States as the first and preeminent cyber power (Department of Defense). In their view, the United States is attempting to achieve “cyber hegemony” (wǎngluò bàquán) through prolific cyber operations, the free flow of information, and dominance of global information and communications technology (ICT) markets (Ye & Zhao, 2014). China in turn seeks “cyber sovereignty” (wǎngluò zhǔquán), where its government does not rely on foreign ICT products and controls both access to networks and the information transmitted within (Kolton, 2017).

## Setting Priorities

If cyber competition requires the United States to focus on achieving its goals and stymieing China’s, how should it prioritize among each? The greatest US priority in cyber competition with China should be stanching the loss of confidential military, economic, and political information through persistent Chinese espionage campaigns. Espionage takes first priority because it comprises the bulk of peacetime cyber operations, to the point where some scholars characterize cyber competition as an intelligence contest (Rovner, 2019). Assessing the total impact of Chinese cyber espionage is likely impossible, since the strategic effect of intelligence comes not just from gleaning raw information but also from analysis and exploitation. However, specific examples make clear that Chinese intelligence agencies are up to the task, from copying designs for advanced military aircraft to using troves of personal data to ferret out US intelligence operatives (Dorfman, 2020; Graff, 2010; McLaughlin & Dorfman, 2019).

A second US priority in cyber competition should be maintaining an open Internet. In this, China has made its priorities clear and has nearly realized information sovereignty within its borders. The main risk is that the United States will follow China’s lead and mistake a rejection of Chinese platforms and technology for security. During the Trump administration, this line of thinking manifested through executive orders on ByteDance, TenCent, Huawei, and ZTE,

along with a diplomatic campaign to convince allies against purchasing Huawei 5G infrastructure. For its part, the Biden administration also released an executive order mandating reviews of supply chains “dependent upon competitor nations” (Allyn, 2020; Barnes & Satoriano, 2019; Bade, 2021; Shepardson & Freifeld, 2020). A Balkanized archipelago of national internets, or even a world divided into US- and China-dominated internets, are not in US interests. These are worlds where American firms are shut out of many markets, where American allies resent forced zero-sum choices<sup>6</sup>, where American researchers cannot collaborate broadly, and where Americans cannot communicate with their families<sup>7</sup>. Both China and the US have significant economic incentives to continue communicating/cooperating; however, in specific recent instances, they have been subordinated to national security concerns. Many American firms, particularly online platforms, are already shut out of the Chinese market. Tech decoupling would sacrifice the wellsprings of US national power for an incomplete understanding of security. A better approach would involve vigorous work in technical standards bodies that unites security and interoperability, diplomacy that offers positive inducements to other countries instead of mere threats against adopting Chinese tech, and domestic data governance laws that enshrine universal standards rather than one-off bans.

## The Value of Regional Cyber Cooperation

US allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region may not share this prioritization. Aside from a few—namely, Australia and Taiwan—most would not characterize their relationship with China, in cyberspace or otherwise, as a competition. But growing regional resentment of Chinese coercion, coupled with the benefits of intelligence cooperation with the United States, offers an opportunity for a narrowly focused cyber pact.

Such a coalition would be appropriate for cyber competition and politically suited to allies’ interests. In contrast to other domains, the main input for cyber capability is skilled personnel, which would increase for pact members both immediately through joint operations and in the long term through capacity-building. Politically, effective cyber cooperation would avoid putting US allies and partners in the uncomfortable position of publicly antagonizing China because it requires nothing as public as port visits or joint drills. As such, a cyber pact would be an effective way to improve the long-term US competitive posture while providing tangible benefits to potential partners.

The United States has signaled an intent to expand the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue into a more formal defense in the Indo-Pacific region (Sevastopulo & Kazmin, 2021; Tirpak, 2021; Delaney, 2020). In this or a similar context, the United States could push forward to lead a regional cybersecurity coalition. Defending forward and persistent engagement are elements

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<sup>6</sup> The US diplomatic campaign against Huawei, in particular the pushback it met in Germany and the UAE, is one such instance.

<sup>7</sup> This is evidenced by the recent attempted WeChat ban (Barnes & Satoriano, 2019; Hu, 2020).

of the Cyber Command strategy to continuously engage cyber adversaries to deny, disrupt, or degrade adversary capabilities. By jointly defending forward in the Indo-Pacific, the United States could demonstrate strategic resolve, reassure allies, bolster extended deterrence, and defend allied national interests while denying the gains of malicious cyberspace operations. The intelligence gained from allied persistent engagement in cyberspace could shrink the attack surfaces of US and allied networks, enable or enhance other military capabilities, and enable the use of allied government levers of power to collectively create dilemmas and inflict costs on China and other adversaries. Over time, the intelligence and experience gained from continuous allied persistent engagement would better position the US-led coalition to prevail in the event of armed conflict (Anderson et al., 2020).

Under the defend forward/persistent engagement construct, the United States has begun to achieve success in thwarting malicious cyberspace operations by engaging them at their point of origin, rather than waiting to act until attackers are in US networks. USCYBERCOM has demonstrated the capability to coordinate effectively with other combatant commands, interagency partners, and coalition allies (Martelle, 2020; BBC News, 2018; Burgess, 2019). Beginning in 2016, the lessons learned from the overall counter-ISIS campaign were applied to subsequent efforts to counter Russian malign influence operations. USCYBERCOM has conducted multiple hunt forward missions on foreign networks, at the invitation of those countries, that identified adversary tradecraft and informed cyber defense (Nakashima, 2019). In 2018, informed by the knowledge gained from these operations, USCYBERCOM disrupted Russian interference in US midterm elections and directly messaged adversary cyber actors (Nakasone & Sulmeyer, 2020). This kind of support can be offered to willing allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific to contest and degrade destructive Chinese competition. Indeed, General Nakasone has stated that expanding military-to-military cyber partnership is a priority, "beginning with the Pacific" (Nakasone & Sulmeyer, 2020).

## A Cybersecurity Coalition

The United States could lead a regional coalition for cybersecurity, in coordination with combined military forces, to counter Chinese cyberspace actions that threaten the national security of allies and partners. The coalition could build upon existing cybersecurity relationships to establish a Combined Joint Persistent Engagement (CJPE) approach to mutual defense in cyberspace. The core members could conduct a form of CJPE, linking defensive cyber operations (DCO) and offensive cyberspace operations (OCO).

A coalition cybersecurity campaign plan could use CJPE to disrupt and defeat malicious cyberspace operations that threaten any member state. Lines of effort could be agreed based on the relative cyberspace capabilities, manpower, and subject matter expertise of individual member states. Categories of malicious cyber activities might include theft of sensitive military information or intellectual property, interference in national elections and politics, and tampering with critical infrastructure (e.g., energy, financial, medical). Within a whole-of-nations approach, allied cyber operations could create dilemmas for China by slowing the

cumulative gains of malicious cyber activities through DCO and by inflicting costs through OCO and other concerted levers of allied government power (Nakasone, 2019). The coalition could also share actionable intelligence with allied government agencies, national computer emergency response teams (CERTS) and private sector cybersecurity partners to expand the inoculation of allied networks to threats and to reduce the overall attack surface available to China and other adversaries (Borghard, 2020). National CERTS and cybersecurity partners could play a significant role in providing or corroborating attribution of cyberattacks. The broader the collection and sharing of cyber intelligence, the greater the friction caused for adversaries, and the greater the credibility of unified allied attribution.

A central core of OCO-capable member states could initiate collaboration in CJPE. Candidates for a core set of members might include the Quad nations, the UK, Canada, and the ROK. Likeminded countries lacking OCO capabilities, or those not wishing to participate in cyber operations against China, might be offered memoranda of understanding with the coalition. Such MOUs might allow core members of the coalition to operate on other allied networks, under agreed terms, to assist with network defense and cybersecurity capacity building (Smeets, 2019).

An allied cyber preparation of the operational environment would identify adversary centers of gravity, classes of targets, and vulnerabilities. New vulnerabilities discovered in continuous interaction would further inform the targeting process (Anderson et al., 2020). Dedicated collection would provide additional information about key adversary organizations, capabilities, and personas that improve both OCO targeting and network defense. This knowledge would inform the ability to blunt cyberattacks and to achieve OCO effects at the right place and time.

## Multi-Domain Operations—New Vectors for Cyberspace Capabilities

Cyber competition also involves preparing for armed conflict or other periods of destructive competition. In those contexts, a regional cyber pact would deepen existing military ties among members while enhancing the overall military balance of power. For its part, the PLA has been integrating cyber, electronic, and psychological warfare capabilities for over two decades in a strategy of informatization that seeks to provide China with asymmetric advantages over legacy US network-centric capabilities (Kania & Costello, 2020). To overcome this perceived gap, the Department of Defense is rapidly standing up new systems that blend cyberspace, electronic warfare (EW), and information operations (IO) in the electromagnetic spectrum. Within the construct of Joint All-Domain Operations (JADO), each of the US services is developing new technologies and systems that blend cyber and electronic warfare (Seffers, 2019; Tirpak, 2020). Joint cyber-EW systems have the potential to conduct denial of service attacks against radio frequency-enabled weapon systems, to infiltrate wireless and software defined radio networks, to identify targets for kinetic weapons strikes, to intercept and decrypt adversary communications (SIGINT), and to defend against adversary cyber-EW systems (Freedberg, 2020). These cyber-EW capabilities, together with enhanced targeting derived from

intelligence collection in CJPE, could provide new options to create dilemmas for China. The ability of a US-led coalition to demonstrate these capabilities in joint operations could reduce Beijing's confidence in its ability to achieve territorial aims and to manage escalation.

### Cyber in Information Operations

The accesses and capabilities generated by increased cyber cooperation would similarly serve for information operations (IO) in the event of armed conflict. To begin reshaping the information domain, a US-led coalition could deploy IO capabilities within an Irregular Warfare (IW) strategy during competition to counter Chinese information warfare. The DoD IW Annex to the NDS calls upon the Joint Force to "erode an adversary's power, influence, and will" using military information support operations (MISO) and by countering threat networks (Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex, 2020). If properly conceived, narrowly targeted, and coordinated with interagency and public diplomacy, these capabilities could provide options to influence adversary audiences in times of destructive competition (Pomerleau, 2020). The capability to deliver carefully targeted narratives, themes, and symbols to PLA warfighters or to Chinese citizens through broadcast and social media, as well as through the JADO systems mentioned above, might alter Beijing's perception of its ability to control the information environment (Tirpak, 2020). Together, these new capabilities could enable the coalition to change the status quo in multiple domains and thereby incrementally alter Beijing's strategic calculus in the Indo-Pacific.

### Conclusion

Like other forms of competition, cyber competition will not be won outright—victories are fleeting and advantage imperceptible in cyberspace. Unlike other forms of competition, it runs little risk of escalating into armed conflict. But other risks exist beyond violence, from poor prioritization that expends unnecessary resources to technological decoupling that hobbles economic growth. Therefore, it will be crucial for the United States to develop a long-term competitive posture that allows it to maintain initiative in cyberspace. Working more closely with Indo-Pacific allies to thwart Chinese cyber operations offers one path towards such an approach and does so in a way structurally suited to cyberspace and politically suited to allied interests.

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## Chapter 9. Military Competition With China: Harder Than the Cold War?

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### Abstract

*The US national defense strategy has characterized the US-China relationship as one of great power competition—a term referring to the struggle between powerful states to shape the world or regional orders in a manner favorable to their interests. Deterring and defeating Chinese aggression requires the United States to 1) convince Beijing that the costs of using force outweigh the benefits, and relatedly, 2) to forge a counterbalancing coalition of states opposed to PRC regional hegemony, or at the very least, a coalition willing to support the US efforts to defeat any PRC aggression. These two objectives are exceedingly difficult for several reasons, making it harder to deter China in some ways than it was to deter the Soviet Union during the Cold War.*

### Introduction

US defense strategy and foreign policy strive to promote peace, stability, and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region. The rise of China creates a series of challenges for the United States in pursuing these goals. Military competition is especially acute. The United States has five treaty allies in the Indo-Pacific, two of which are engaged in territorial disputes with China (Japan in the East China Sea and the Philippines in the South China Sea). China also backs North Korea economically, politically, and militarily, which threatens US ally South Korea's security. And while the United States officially abrogated its defense treaty with Taiwan, the United States is still deeply invested in Taiwan's defense.

China has relied mainly on grey zone activities and economic and diplomatic tools to coerce other claimants to accommodate its positions. Still, as Chinese military power grows, this is likely to change. Chinese Communist Party leaders, including Xi Jinping, have made several statements articulating that its most important task is to regain control over what it considers its territory. If the displays and expressions of Chinese nationalism are truly believed, the Chinese people agree that sovereignty and territorial integrity as the Party defines them are the most important missions (Ni, 2019). This is not an unusual position; approximately 80% of wars from 1648 to 1990 were fought over territory-related disputes (Mitchell & Trumbore, 2014; Vasquez, 1995). While incremental progress can be made through nonmilitary measures, complete control over these territories can only be accomplished through the use of force.

Thus, the goal of US military strategy has been to deter and defeat PRC aggression in the Indo-Pacific. The 2017 National Security Strategy asserts that the United States “will maintain a forward military presence [in the Indo-Pacific] capable of deterring and, if necessary, defeating any adversary” (Trump, 2017). More explicitly, the 2018 National Defense Strategy states, “China is leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics to coerce neighboring countries to reorder the Indo-Pacific region to their advantage” (Mattis, 2018). Accordingly, “the far-reaching objective of this defense strategy is to set the military relationship between our two countries on a path of transparency and non-aggression” (Mattis, 2018).

Many studies focus on the balance of forces and capabilities to assess the status of military competition with China (OSD, 2018). Other notable studies evaluate the performance of each side in particular contingencies (Heginbotham, 2015). I have written, in the past, about the balance of conventional forces concerning India, conditions under which China will use force in the South China Sea, Beijing's changing views of Taiwan, and whether China is a near-peer military competitor of the United States (Mastro and Tarapore 2020; Mastro 2020a; Mastro 2020c).

But the US National Defense Strategy has characterized the US-China relationship as one of great power competition, a term referring to the struggle between powerful states to shape the world or regional orders in a manner favorable to their interests (Friedman, 2019). Given this context, my contribution will focus on how deterring PRC aggression is more difficult now than during the Cold War. Deterring and defeating Chinese aggression requires the US to 1) convince Beijing that the costs of using force outweigh the benefits, and relatedly, 2) to forge a counterbalancing coalition of states opposed to PRC regional hegemony, or at the very least, a coalition willing to support the US efforts to defeat any PRC aggression.

## A New Age of Deterrence

There are important ways in which these objectives are easier to meet now than during the Cold War. For example, the geography of the Asia-Pacific is less conducive to rapid fait accompli than Central Europe's geography during the Cold War. The United States never believed it could defend the inter-German border against Soviet aggression without the conflict escalating to the nuclear level. However, both Chinese and American military strategy and planning allude to the belief that conflict could remain conventional and limited, even between nuclear powers.

But for the most part, prevailing in this military competition will be more difficult for the United States. Below, I lay out a few reasons why this is likely the case.

## Establishing a Credible Deterrent

Deterrence is “the art of coercion and intimidation” in which “the power to hurt [is used] as bargaining power...and is most successful when it is held in reserve” (Schelling, 2008).

Successful deterrence requires the threat of unacceptable cost to be credible. There are some reasons to believe that credibly communicating such a threat is difficult in the case of China.

First, there is some uncertainty in Beijing about whether the United States has the resolve to fight on its allies' behalf. During the Cold War, the United States used a tripwire strategy quite effectively to communicate its resolve to uphold its alliance commitments. In essence, the United States forward-deployed US military personnel that its communist adversaries would have to attack to achieve their objectives. This strategy was effective because most of the potential Soviet uses of force the United States was trying to deter were land-based. On land, it was possible to position forces so that the Soviets would have to engage US troops in their pursuit.

But in the Indo-Pacific, most of the contingencies the United States is planning for are primarily air and sea battles. There is no effective way to position US aircraft and surface vessels such that China has no choice but to engage US forces when attacking an ally. Therefore, if China were to use force, it will always be a separate, independent decision on the part of the United States whether to get involved in its partner's defense. And thus, the forward deployment of forces does less to signal US resolve to fight than during the Cold War.

China also has more options for nonlethal but effective uses of force than the Soviet Union did—specifically, in cyberspace and outer space. Reportedly, China conducted a set of attacks against command and control links for NASA satellites between 2007 and 2009 and successfully achieved the ability to send commands to the satellite (Weeden, 2020). China also has electronic warfare capabilities to disrupt civilian satellite communications and has demonstrated its ability to jam and spoof GPS signals (Weeden, 2020). In recent decades, the United States has become more reliant on these realms to project power, making even a nonlethal attack potentially devastating operationally. For example, during the Iraq War, the United States used 42 times the bandwidth of the first Gulf War (Talbot, 2004).

It is very difficult to deter attacks in these domains because the benefits are so high—potentially preventing US intervention—and the costs relatively low. Any US threat to impose an unacceptable cost in response is by its nature incredible, given that attacks in cyber and space do not directly result in loss of life. US strategists have given significant consideration to the challenge and have promoted the idea of cross-domain deterrence (Mallory, 2018). But it is hard to imagine a US president authorizing lethal force against China if Beijing has yet to do so.

Nuclear escalation threats are even less credible. During the Cold War, the threat to use nuclear weapons was always somewhat incredible, but it was at least mildly plausible as a threat if the alternative was to lose all of Europe and see the global balance of power shift dramatically. It is far less credible in a circumstance where defeat would not necessarily be the end of the US regional position. Beijing does not attempt to occupy any US allies (Taiwan, an informal ally, being the exception), and the territories under dispute between US allies and

Beijing are relatively unoccupied. For context, West Berlin had a population of around 2 million, while inhabitants of the currently disputed Spratly Islands number in the low hundreds (Torode & Mogato, 2015).

Another reason deterrence against China is difficult concerns what the United States is trying to deter on the grand strategic level—a Chinese sphere of influence in Asia predicated on Beijing regaining territory it considers its own. But the United States did grant Russia a sphere of influence and never attempted to deter Russia from joining with 14 other republics to become the Soviet Union. The United States also basically conceded the occupation of Eastern Europe, reacting tepidly to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia but warning a similar invasion of Romania would elicit a stronger response (Knight, 2018). In other words, the United States was attempting to prevent the Soviet Union from further peripheral expansion, but Moscow was allowed a sphere of influence.

But in China's case, the United States is unwilling to concede such a parallel sphere of influence and thus is trying to deter expansion that Beijing sees as necessary to its national survival. Therefore, the benefits of aggression are much higher for Beijing; Taiwan matters more to Beijing than Berlin or Paris ever did to Moscow. And while president after president has attempted to rebalance US military efforts to the Asia-Pacific, the American people have been slow to get on board. In a recent Chicago Council Poll, 61% of Americans believed the Middle East to be the most important region of the world to US security interests; only 12% responded that Asia was (Kafura & Smeltz, 2020).

## Building a Coalition

A key part of the challenge of regional defense involves rounding up a strong group of partners committed to opposing PRC hegemony, including their willingness to provide the United States with the operational support it needs in terms of access, force posture, logistical, economic, and diplomatic support in a crisis. It is harder to build such a regional coalition in the competition with China than during the Cold War for several reasons.

First and foremost, China's grand strategy has focused heavily on preventing a countervailing coalition from forming against it. China is asking less of countries than the United States (or even the Soviet Union) did. The United States is asking them to potentially put their security and prosperity on the line to support US efforts in a contingency; China, in contrast, is not asking for any support. Militarily, China can operate effectively from its bases. It only asks for neutrality, which is easier politically for regional leaders to grant in the case of a conflict. In all likely contingencies, China plans on fighting only the country directly involved (most likely initiating the attack itself) and possibly the United States if Washington chooses to intervene. But Beijing has worked hard to ensure that other countries, even US allies, remain neutral in any conflagration.

Power projection is harder for the United States in Asia than it was in Europe. First, the sprawling geography of Asia requires power projection across vast distances. For context, the

South China Sea is larger in square miles than all of Western Europe. To prevail in any conflict against China, the United States will need to operate from bases and places in the region. But securing pledges of support from countries has been all but impossible. US partners and allies in Asia have not formed a multilateral mutual defense organization as European ones have though NATO. Even two close US allies like Japan and South Korea consistently refuse to work together and broaden meaningful defense cooperation. Tensions rooted in the complex history between the two countries, particularly Japan's colonialization of South Korea, flared up again in 2019, for example. The resulting deterioration of Japan-ROK relations heightened concerns that Tokyo and Seoul's past may prevent them from relying on each other as security partners (Botto, 2020).

There are sharper tradeoffs for US allies and partners than during the Cold War. China is not the existential or even ideological threat the Soviet Union was. And these partners and allies enjoy great economic benefits associated with continued strong ties with Beijing. These factors make it harder for the US to build a coalition against Chinese aggression. This is partly because the PRC has more relative resources to draw close even US allies, and Beijing does not present a clear and existential threat to most countries in the region and throughout the world. While China has some territorial disputes and clear ideological differences between its one-party system and liberal democracies, China has no aspirations to conquer other countries or change their domestic governance forms (Taiwan being the obvious outlier).

Economically, the costs of alienating Beijing would be significant for any regional player. The number one trading partner of all US allies and potential partners (like Singapore) is China. Consider Japan, one of the United States' closest Asian allies. In 2018, 23% of imports were from China, and 19% of exports were from China (World Integrated Trade Solution, 2018). The European Union is similarly economically interlinked with China. In fact, the EU recently finalized an investment agreement with Beijing that may further discourage European allies from becoming involved in a military confrontation with China (Griffiths, 2020). The Soviet Union did not have this economic power over US allies during the Cold War, as there was little trade between them.

China also has vast economic resources that it can bring to bear in the military competition to buy off potential partners of the United States and invest in its military modernization. For instance, in recent years, China has offered billions of dollars' worth of infrastructure investment deals to the Philippines (McLaughlin, 2019). But even just looking at the direct competition between China and the United States, Washington has a much harder time with China than it did with the Soviet Union. For example, the ratio of Soviet to American gross national product increased from around 48% in 1961 to just 51% in 1969 (Trachtenberg, 2018). Additionally, during the height of the Cold War, the US spent around 9% of GDP on defense, compared to roughly 3% now (Macrotrends, n.d.). In other words, the US had twice the relative power of the Soviet Union (while China and the US are closer to parity) and dedicated more of its resources to defense than it is now.

Overall, the default is for countries to stay neutral and uninvolved in any conflict others may have with China, even if (or perhaps because) they fear being the next target of Beijing's wrath. Even Southeast Asia countries insist they do not want to choose a side, even as China infringes on their sovereignty in the South China Sea. Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has declared that proposals for "Indo-Pacific cooperation" should not "create rival blocs, deepen fault lines or force countries to take sides" (Stromseth, 2019). Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison expressed similar sentiments: "Our relationships with each of these major partners are different, and they're both successful. Australia doesn't have to choose, and we won't choose" (Coorey, 2018).

European allies are even more reluctant to involve themselves. While during the Cold War, the Soviet Union presented a threat to US allies in both theaters, today, China does not present a real military threat to Europe. Chinese alignment with Russia and its interference in European democracies has heightened European threat perceptions. Particularly in Central Europe, China has made political inroads through extensive infrastructure investment (Conley & Hillman, n.d.) and purchasing local technology and media companies (Johnson, 2020). But no European country fears a direct PRC attack or invasion. Thus, the disparate threat perceptions make it harder than during the Cold War for the United States to coordinate allied support in its military competition with China.

Under the Trump administration, the United States tried to leverage ideological differences to encourage coalition building. But appealing to ideological differences is harder than it was during the Cold War. Granted, China is a communist, autocratic regime, as was the Soviet Union was. But unlike the Soviet Union, Beijing has no desire to overthrow democratic regimes or prop up client states around the world. China has no real allies that it will defend and has never deployed troops abroad outside of multilateral constructs like UN peacekeeping operations or the Gulf of Aden anti-piracy mission. It does not leverage arms sales as a main tool of influence. While China's image around the world has taken a hit, particularly during the COVID-19 crisis (Silver et al., 2020), most countries do not see it as an existential threat (Kafura & Smeltz, 2020). Interestingly, of 34 surveyed countries, most view China's growing military as a bad thing for their country but believe that China's growing economy is good (Devlin et al., 2019).

## Conclusion

Pundits and scholars alike are currently debating whether the competition between the United States and China resembles that between Washington and Moscow during the Cold War. In this contribution, I highlight one reason why such a comparison is problematic and counterproductive—in some cases, it is more difficult to deter and defeat Chinese regional aggression than it was to counter Soviet aggression. Thus, the United States must avoid relying on the same Cold War tools and strategies of competition, even if they were effective decades ago. Ensuring that the United States is the security partner of choice in the region is no longer sufficient to compete with China, as many countries value their economic relationships with

Beijing more. Instead, the United States needs to demonstrate to its allies and partners that it can protect them not only from military attack but also against other costly behaviors Beijing may leverage against them, such as economic coercion or diplomatic isolation. These are only a few examples to highlight that Cold War thinking is a sure way for the US to lose the competition with China.

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## Conclusion. What Are the US and China Really Competing For?

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The following provides reflections on topics raised in the excellent contributions to this volume. They fall into four bins: the competition concept, the objective of competing, understanding China in the competitive context, and managing future competition. Each is divided into a set of key points.

	Competition					Limited conflict	Warfare
	Cooperation	Constructive		Destructive			
example actions	e.g., alliance, joint operations	benign challenge	obnoxious and suspect actions	rules violations	direct threat/challenge	direct contest	
meta goal	mutual gain	gain, sometimes at expense of other			avoid own loss (defend) by defeating the threat		

Figure 5. Expanded Competitive Continuum and Meta Objectives

### The Competition Concept: What Should We Mean By Competition?

Simply replacing a two-point “war-peace” with a three-point “war-competition-peace” is inadequate and will undermine the US’s ability to understand and manage competitive environments.

Simply including “competition” as a third point with a set of three types of operational settings will not produce the nuanced, issue-specific analyses that are essential for competing in the current international environment. This is because there is not a single, discrete type of “competition,” but rather a series of factors whose values determine where a relationship lies on a continuum of competition from constructive and tolerable, motivating to destructive and intolerable. Adopting “competition” into the defense lexicon without careful articulation of the attributes of forms of competition along the continuum is really nothing but a change in nomenclature, albeit one that can convey a false sense of precision, and in the understanding of the threats and opportunities in the environment. Instead, a different mindset is required that allows for gradations of competition and competing that have different definitions, features, and behavioral expectations. Failing to distinguish between “limited” and “total” warfare can bias decision making and lead to unintended outcomes (e.g., defeat, escalation), failing to differentiate types of competition can do the same.

As a first step, it is important to recognize the difference between two broad categories of competition: constructive and destructive. Constructive competition is a state in which actors

view their interests on a given issue to be in non-threatening, non-damaging opposition. Constructive competition can range from friendly competition in which team members push each other to do their best, to not appreciated but nominally tolerable actions such as greasing a pitch in baseball or flopping in soccer (Astorino-Courtois, 2021; Astorino-Courtois, 2019.) As the intensity of opposition between actors' interests rises, constructive competition gives way to destructive competition, a state in which actors' interests on a particular issue are opposed in ways that are seen as potentially or actually damaging to their interests. This is not just a question of semantics. Chinese narratives that attempt to stigmatize the idea of competition in the international arena as aggressive and as a sign of a lingering "Cold War mentality" (Harold, Present Volume–PV) will be convincing if the US shows evidence that it is clinging to a static notion of the world, with the US at the top. One helpful move would be to include careful distinctions in US national security discourse between competition that is fair, tolerable, and constructive and destructive competition that is more likely to escalate to serious conflict.

### The Meta Goal of Competing: What Is the US-China Competition Actually About?

Simply defining what competition is begs the more critical question: What are we competing for? Engaging in cooperative, competitive, and armed warlike behaviors are responses to perceived conditions in the international environment.

There are numerous efforts across the defense establishment to define "competition with China" or "the competitive space." However, discussion of first principles—the meta goal—of competing in the international arena has been missing. That is, what the US hopes to gain, or avoid losing, by choosing to compete. The meta goal of war is clear: to use the most expedient means possible to avoid losing power and assets to another actor (i.e., to defend the state). This applies equally whether the domain is security and/or whether the operations are kinetic. Similarly, the meta goal of cooperation is to gain mutual benefit with another, typically on issues that could not be accomplished as well, or at all, alone. Coordinating US plans and messaging activities to different groups will require a common understanding of what the US is competing for and thus what the goal is. Ambiguity about why the US has chosen to compete (rather than pursue cooperation, for example) is a serious gap that will become more serious as it propagates, impeding a planner's ability to correctly interpret commander's intent or an operations officer's understanding of the nature of his task job.

As suggested, there is a lack of clarity about what US leaders see as the purpose of choosing to compete. Given US interests, what should it be? The competition between the US and China ultimately boils down to a quest for international leverage, or influence, broadly defined, (i.e., the capacity to determine or shape the outcomes of international events in ways favorable to themselves). The Chinese have already put considerable effort, backed by considerable funds, into expanding their global influence (Davis & Monroe, PV). The US? Not so much. Normalizing strategies to a meta goal, such as gaining international influence, that applies equally across

geographical and functional combatant commands, as well as the rest of D, I, M, and E, immediately boosts “whole-of-government” coordination without need of bureaucratic, legislative, or process change. For the Department of Defense, the meta goal would direct all strategies and engagements—at all echelons—toward the requirement to retain and gain influence in the security realm. Similarly, the Departments of State and Commerce would center their strategies and activities on optimizing US diplomatic and international commercial influence, respectively. What changes are the activities taken to extend US influence. Finally, centering on “international influence” offers a single meta goal that applies whether the US is competing with friends, actors with different perspectives, or actors that hold adversarial views.

## China In the Competitive Context

With some help from the US, China has successfully shifted competition in East Asia in its favor. One feature of China’s strategy is to undercut the leverage the US gains from alliance partners who might be mobilized to support the US in a conflict against China.

The economic leverage China has gained over Asia-Pacific states, including US allies like Australia, South Korea, and Japan, has had the effect of increasing the cost borne by states that would choose to side with the US over China in a dispute. Maestro (PV) writes that, “ensuring that the US is the security partner of choice in the region is no longer sufficient to compete with China as many countries value their economic relationships with Beijing more.” There are three reasons: 1) Their economies are more tightly linked to China’s than to the US; 2) The US has failed to pay attention to, and in some cases disregarded, regional relationships; and 3) Even US allies do not want to have to choose between the US and China (Maestro, PV), and if they are forced to, compliance with China’s request to do nothing, to remain neutral, is much less risky than the active support the US may desire (Swaine, PV).

China’s long-term objective? Two schools of thought and two questions.

There is a significant divide within the US defense community regarding what people believe to be China’s strategic intent, or meta goal. There is one school of thought that believes China’s goal is to be a global leader, versus the global leader (Swaine, PV; Yang, PV). The argument of the “a global leader” school is that Chinese leaders recognize the ways in which the current international system has benefitted China’s development and thus have no driving desire to supplant US leadership with its own. Rather, Chinese leaders would be happy to co-lead with the US as the world’s preeminent powers. This school also encompasses those who highlight the significant hurdles (e.g., demographic change, urbanization, etc.) that China must still overcome in order to reach its development goals. The main argument is that Chinese leaders recognize that pursuing global dominance is an enormously expensive proposition and, frankly, regardless of its expanding military, a cost that China does not need to incur if it could assume a co-leadership role with the US (Swaine, PC). On the other hand, the “the global leader” school interprets China’s growing military and economic power as evidence that its strategic goal is to enhance its global power capability to the point of usurping the

US position in the global order. Finally, Shanahan (PV) points to a position that rests between the two schools. Namely, as China's capacity to influence world events expands, the cost of military US-China hostilities will rise more steeply for the US than for China. In other words, there is a multiplier effect at play when even relatively moderate increases in Chinese coercive capabilities are added to consequent deterioration of the credibility of US deterrent threats in the region. Relatedly, Shanahan also highlights this apparent paradox: Attempting to match China military-to-military in East Asia will disadvantage the US, even though it has, and likely will continue to have, unquestioned military dominance over China. Why? Because if China were to take action to re-establish control over disputed territories, there is no possible show of US resolve involving military forces that would not be seen as escalatory and provocative.

Mirror-imaging is a significant potential source of bias here. As Campbell and Kirkpatrick (PV) put it, the US should not attempt to "out-China China." Chinese leaders may not believe that they need coercive capacity anywhere near that of the US in order to achieve their regional ambitions. Note that if China were to act on these ambitions—despite long-standing US policy that would stymie them—it would further diminish US international influence and the credibility of its deterrent threats in other areas of the world. It would also do so without the global power projection or coercive force of the US. Here are the questions: Is the "a global leader" school underestimating Chinese willingness to assume global leadership from the US if it can do so at a reasonable cost? Is the "the leader" school overestimating China's calculation regarding how much coercive force is necessary to do this?

## Manage the Environment, Not the Actor

The best way to defend US interests in competition with China? Substitute the desire to win with the desire to manage.

According to Denmark (PV), China's leaders tend to presume that constant change and tension, sometimes breaking out in serious conflict, is the natural state of the global order (Denmark, PV). Even if US-China competition is inevitable, however, armed conflict is not (Shanahan), but treating China as if it is an existential threat can easily become a self-fulfilling prophesy. The US requires a more nuanced, less reductionist understanding of Chinese decision making that recognizes that its international behavior is the result of multiple constituencies and competing preferences within the Party leadership (Swaine, PV), together with multiple national interests that have little to do with the US but nevertheless impact Chinese foreign relations.<sup>8</sup> It is important to quickly institutionalize the mindset that US-China

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<sup>8</sup> It is clearly the case today that updated thinking about the operational environment is mission critical (Astorino-Courtois, 2021, forthcoming). That said, there is an important difference in bureaucratic structure and related "churn" that must be recognized, especially as related to competition with China. China's political decision-making process is smaller and more centralized than the widely distributed US system. As a result, it does not suffer the same delays in defining and translating new approaches and concepts from the top down to all levels of government. By contrast, the US distributed structure empowers many people at different levels to define operational concepts and translate new security directives into plans and action. This is a double-edged sword.

relations occur within a complex (adaptive) international system (Hoffman, PV) characterized by continual learning, significant interdependencies across multiple domains, and sometimes-unintended feedback loops that drive its evolution. US-China relations is a multi-faceted, constantly evolving strategic interaction. It is a game of incomplete information, uncertainties, and emergent properties: Just because both China and the US prefer to avoid direct, militarized conflict does not assure that it will not occur.

A strategy focused primarily on winning or losing competition with China misses the point. There is no discrete outcome. Rather, as Hoffman (PV) argues, the persistent objective of competition is mainly to stay in the game.<sup>9</sup> In order to do so, continual management of the operational context, and the US position, in it is required. Given a continuously changing operational environment, the best, some would argue the only strategy is to manage one's position relative to the shifts—not relative to a single actor, China or otherwise. Requirements management may provide a useful framework. It is a continuous process for shaping and controlling change for the duration of a project based on agreed-upon requirements. The requirement in this case is "US international influence," and all objectives and activities should be traceable to and evaluated on its capacity to generate influence. In a constantly shifting environment, it follows that fixation on a single actor or class of actors (e.g., Islamic terrorism) can cause analysts and decision makers to continuously misread the mid- and longer-term challenges that will be posed by changes in the environment (e.g., China's rise).

Analogizing to the Cold War is not helpful.

The international environment is much more complex than it was during the Cold War, and analogizing to that time is not likely to prove helpful (Shanahan, PV), in no small measure because of the complex web of interdependencies that link the two economies and those of allies. There are also many more gradations of the relationship that must be considered.

Initial management challenge: careful analysis of the context, flexibility, and differentiation.

When the US and China compete over a specific issue, the first management challenge is to determine what is needed in order to compete on that issue. Is the competitive context such

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The sharper edge is that ambiguity around constructs like "great power competition" propagates broadly through the system, to the point that it becomes difficult to determine which types of activities, techniques, and procedures support the new directive. This leaves wide latitude for seemingly nominal differences in interpretation that can have large and unintended impact when aggregated across the totality of US military operations around the globe. Again, while this is an inevitable result of how the US prefers to organize itself, it is nevertheless important to recognize that the more ambiguous and ill-defined the strategic concept is, the longer and deeper will be the churn period during which senior-level decision makers may be following one set of ideas about what constitutes "competition with China" and those making operational and tactical choices toward another.

<sup>9</sup> In fact, this marks the critical difference between conflict, which refers to a discrete event, generally with a beginning and an end, as well as a definable objective and outcome (i.e., to win, lose, or draw) and competition in international affairs.

that promoting US interests can only be accomplished if the US possesses greater influence relative to the issue than does China, can US interests be served if US influence is equal to China's, or is it possible to promote US interests sufficiently even if the US maintains inferior capability to influence the outcome? How the US decides to see China's versus its own place in the world will condition which actions we think are appropriate competitive actions. If we decide that dominance on all domains is the best way forward, the US must be prepared to enter into an arms race in the space or cyber domains. If we decide a balance of power or regional spheres of interest are the most desired states, substantial rearticulation of US policy vis-à-vis Taiwan and China's regional economic activities will emerge.

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## Biographies

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Previously, Dr. Astorino-Courtois was a Senior Analyst at SAIC (2004-2007) where she served as a USSTRATCOM liaison to US and international academic and business communities. Prior to that Dr. Astorino-Courtois was a tenured Associate Professor of International Relations at Texas A&M University in College Station, TX (1994-2003) where her research focused on the cognitive aspects of political decision making and how to "market" peaceful conflict resolution to adversarial actors. She has received a number of academic grants and awards and has published articles in multiple peer-reviewed journals. She has also taught at Creighton University and as a visiting instructor at the US Military Academy at West Point. Dr. Astorino-Courtois earned her Ph.D. in International Relations and MA in and Research Methods from New York University. Her BA is in political science from Boston College. Finally, Dr. Astorino-Courtois also has the distinction of having been awarded both a US Navy Meritorious Service Award and a US Army Commander's Award.

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Dr. Hriar "Doc" Cabayan is currently a member of the Office of Defense Coordination at the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory. He joined the laboratory in 1977 and worked on nuclear weapons effects, Strategic Defense Initiative related efforts, and directed energy programs. In 1997 he joined the Joint Staff/J-39 where he managed the Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) Program. In 2007, He received the Joint Meritorious Civilian Service Award from the Office of the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff in 2007 and again in 2019. He returned to Lawrence Livermore Laboratory in October 2019.

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Davis began his career at the Congressional Research Service at the Library of Congress and has served with the State Department, Congressional committees, and the National Security Council. Davis was group leader for proliferation networks in LLNL's Z Program and in 2007 he was Senior Advisor at the National Counter Proliferation Center, in the office of the Director of National Intelligence. He is the author of numerous government studies and reports on technical and regional proliferation issues. He currently leads a project on the national security implications of advanced technologies, focusing on special operations forces.



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Mr. Mark A. Hoffman is the manager for the Peer Competition and Influence Operations Research Group at Lockheed Martin Advanced Technology Laboratory. He has over 30 years of experience specializing in the development and management of advanced concepts and systems that incorporate state of the art information technology and analytics into Intelligence Analysis, and Decision Support systems. His research focus has been the application of Neuro-Symbolic AI techniques to the analysis of and recommendations for non-kinetic peer-adversary engagement.



Mr. Hoffman has been the Program Manager and Principle investigator for more than 30 DARPA, IARPA, and Service Lab programs and projects. This includes that DARPA Integrated Crises Early Warning System (ICEWS) demonstrating social science analytics and forecasting of worldwide unrest events. These capabilities represent the first successful transition of computational social science to a DOD Program of Record.

Mr. Hoffman served as a member of the US DoD Defense Science Board summer study in 2016 on Constrained Military Operations (Gray Zone conflicts). Mr. Hoffman has authored over 25 scientific peer-reviewed conference papers and publications, and three book chapters. He

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David Kirkpatrick is an intelligence analyst with Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, currently specializing in cyber intelligence and threats to critical infrastructure. He retired from the Air Force in 2018, where he most recently served as a cyber intelligence analyst with USCYBERCOM. He was previously an Air Reserve Technician, serving as Senior Intelligence Analyst at the 713<sup>th</sup> Combat Operations Squadron, supporting USPACOM A2. He has several years of prior service experience with the Army in the counterintelligence and psychological operations career fields, serving on active duty in Germany, Bosnia, and Iraq. David holds an M.A. in Economics from San Francisco State University.



### Dr. Oriana Skylar Mastro (Maj, USAFR) (USINDOPACOM; Stanford University; AEI)

Oriana Skylar Mastro is a Center Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, Stanford University where her research focuses on Chinese military and security policy, Asia-Pacific security issues, war termination, and coercive diplomacy. She is also non-resident Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and continues to serve in the United States Air Force Reserve for which she works as a strategic planner at INDOPACOM J56. For her contributions to U.S. strategy in Asia, she won the Individual Reservist of the Year Award in 2016. She has published widely, including in *Foreign Affairs*, *International Security*, *International Studies Review*, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, *The Washington Quarterly*, *The National Interest*, *Survival*, and *Asian Security*. Her book, *The Costs of Conversation: Obstacles to Peace Talks in Wartime*, (Cornell University Press, 2019), won the 2020 American Political Science Association International Security Section Best Book by an Untenured Faculty Member. She holds a B.A. in East Asian Studies from Stanford University and an M.A. and Ph.D. in Politics from Princeton University. Her publications and other commentary can be found at [www.orianaskylarmastro.com](http://www.orianaskylarmastro.com) and on twitter @osmastro.



## Mr. Marshall Monroe (Marshall Monroe Magic; National Center for Soft Power Strategies)

Marshall Monroe is Founder and Chairman of Marshall Monroe MAGIC, a Creative Strategic Planning and Innovative Design Studio headquartered in New Mexico, U.S. The firm leverages their on-going research in the fields of Innovation Excellence and Global Market Dynamics to formulate new transformation plans and advise select clients in areas of visioning, master planning, advanced concepts, mission transformation, business development, and the meeting of grand strategic challenges. MMMagic's category-leading clients include Cirque du Soleil, The Michael Jackson Estate, Legendary Entertainment, HBO, DIRECTV, NASA, USSOCOM, Multiple National Laboratories, The U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, The U.S. Department of Defense, Multiple Native Tribes, The Defense Threat Reduction Agency, MITRE Corporation, Spaceport America, Wine.com, The National Inventors Hall of Fame, The C.M. Russell Museum, The Intel International Science and Engineering Fair, and the Virgin Group. Monroe is founder of the Magic Canyon Institute, and has briefed white papers from that research arm of his enterprise to multiple U.S. National Labs, the Pentagon, U.K. Special Forces groups, and The U.S. Department of State. The Magic Canyon Institute has proven itself to be a leading and prescient voice in strategic planning for Soft Power scenarios, in particular involving the Pacific Rim and Great Powers Competition.



Monroe's firm is currently leading a design effort as part of a transformational vision for food production industries, integrating high performance robotics and complex interactive vision networks to improve productivity and transparency for education purposes. They are also deeply engaged in new spatial/4D capture and AI visualization initiatives for exclusive clients.

The Marshall Monroe MAGIC internal venture Combinator is exploring the seismic migration of business, especially the media, content, retail, and entertainment sectors, to mobile-realtime and AI platforms. The Combinator spun off its first joint venture after designing, engineering, and deploying the award-winning mobile strategy and iPad app for leading internet retailer Wine.com. Currently, the Combinator is releasing their groundbreaking Ultra-Media Network platform, MIXONIUM™, with NFL Superstar Terrell "TO" Owens as a marquee user, and their second enterprise concept, VibeWyre™, is launching a new era for public safety via the management and curation of cross-platform social media.

Monroe spent 14 years as a Creative Executive with the Walt Disney Company and was a founding member of the Disney Research and Development Division. He holds 17 patents for media and entertainment technologies in use literally all over the world. He is well known for

his outrageous concept for Blizzard Beach, the wildly successful \$100 million water park in Walt Disney World, Florida.

Monroe is a former member of the U.S. Director of National Intelligence's Intelligence Science Board, an organization of distinguished thought leaders advising senior U.S. administration decision-makers on Science and Technology investment as related to National Security. As founding Chairman of the New Mexico Governor's Council on Film and Media Industries, he led a strategic planning effort for the state in this industry sector which resulted in an economic impact increase from \$40 million annually to over \$6 billion aggregated in less than eight years. 2019 was been a banner year for the initiative, with the most direct spending in one year in the history of the program, and a commitment from Netflix and NBC for domicile production hubs, each with over \$1 billion in production committed. Monroe has a degree in Mechanical Engineering and Fine Art from Stanford University. Monroe is also an expert witness and advisor in Intellectual Property Litigation.

### Ms. Nicole Peterson (NSI, Inc.)

Nicole Peterson is a Senior Analyst who assists in qualitative research and strategic analysis in support of Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment (SMA) efforts primarily focused on national security issues and Department of Defense (DoD) concerns. She has contributed to NSI's Virtual Think Tank (ViTTa®), Reachback, and discourse analyses during her time at NSI. Nicole coordinates SMA's speaker series, which encompasses a broad range of topics from radicalization of populations and violent extremist organizations to artificial intelligence. She is also SMA's current Perspectives team lead and the co-publisher of SMA's weekly newsletter, which summarizes SMA speaker sessions, outlines upcoming events, and disseminates relevant publications. Nicole began her career at NSI as an undergraduate intern for its commercial sector and was subsequently promoted to an associate analyst for its government sector in 2016. She graduated with honors from the University of San Diego where she received a BA in applied mathematics and a minor in accountancy.



## Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Jack Shanahan (USAF, Retired)

John (Jack) Shanahan, Lieutenant General (retired), United States Air Force, retired in 2020 after a 36-year military career. His final assignment was as the inaugural Director of the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) Joint Artificial Center (JAIC). Jack served in a variety of operational and staff positions in various fields including flying, intelligence, policy, and command and control. He commanded at the squadron, group, wing, Agency, and

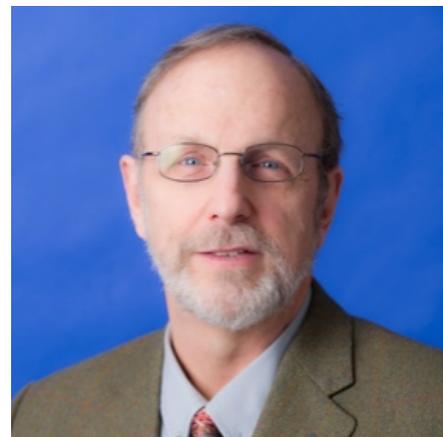


Numbered Air Force levels. As the first Director of the Algorithmic Warfare Cross-Functional Team (Project Maven), Jack established and led DoD's pathfinder AI fielding program charged with bringing AI capabilities to intelligence collection and analysis.

Jack is currently a graduate student in the Master of International Studies program at North Carolina State University. He is also a Special Government Employee supporting the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence; serves on the Board of Advisors for the Common Mission Project; is an advisor to The Changing Character of War Centre (Oxford University); is a member of the CACI Strategic Advisory Group; and serves as an Advisor to the Military Cyber Professionals Association.

## Dr. Michael D. Swaine (Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft)

Michael D. Swaine is one the most prominent American analysts in Chinese security studies. Formerly a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace for nearly 20 years and before that a senior policy analyst at the RAND Corporation for many years, Swaine is a specialist in Chinese defense and foreign policy, US-China relations, and East Asian international relations. He is also the Director of the East Asia Program at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. He has authored and edited more than a dozen books and monographs and many journal articles and book chapters in these areas, directs security-related projects with Chinese partners, and advises the US government on Asian security issues. He received his M.A. and Ph.D. in government from Harvard University.



## Dr. Yi E. Yang (James Madison University)

Yi Edward Yang is Professor of Political Science at James Madison University, Virginia. He specializes in foreign policy decision-making, political psychology, and Chinese foreign policy. His research has appeared in several edited volumes and peer-reviewed scholarly journals including the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *Political Psychology*, *Political Research Quarterly*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, and the *Chinese Journal of International Politics*. In 2016-2018, he served as president of the Association of Chinese Political Studies (ACPS), the largest US-based organization dedicated to academic and professional activities relating to Chinese politics. Dr. Yang received his bachelor's degree in diplomacy and international affairs from China Foreign Affairs University in Beijing and his Ph.D. in political science from Texas A&M University.





## Strategic Multilayer Assessment Joint Staff, Deputy Director of Global Operations (DDGO)

**E**stablished in 2000, Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) provides planning and decision support to combatant commands and other US government (USG) departments and agencies.

*SMA's mission is to enable decision makers to develop more cogent and effective strategy and doctrine, bridging the gap between the academic research community and operators and planners.*

SMA addresses complex operational or technical challenges that transcend typical department boundaries and lie outside the core competencies or expertise of a single command or agency. SMA executes projects that require mixed method, multidisciplinary approaches and creates teams combining expertise from across the USG, academia, international partners, and the private sector. SMA is agnostic to outcome, emphasizing scientific rigor and thorough examination and analysis. SMA does not write policy, plans, or doctrine and does not perform intelligence analysis.

*SMA mission areas include, but are not limited to:* information operations, counterproliferation, fragile state dynamics, countering violent extremism, gray zone, strategic and great power competition, warfighter technology gaps, and 21<sup>st</sup> century deterrence.

### SMA Outreach & Events

SMA built and sustains a community of interest comprising over 5,000 individuals and has ties to 175 US universities, 20 foreign universities, 14 major think tanks, and eight foreign military organizations. To join the SMA email listserv and receive notifications regarding SMA reports and upcoming events, please send your name, email address, and organization to Ms. Mariah Yager ([mariah.c.yager.ctr@mail.mil](mailto:mariah.c.yager.ctr@mail.mil)).



SMA holds weekly speaker series events featuring leading experts discussing emerging national security challenges facing the combatant commands, the Joint Force, US allies, and the world. Access the event archives, which include audio or video recordings when available, written summaries of presentations, and speaker bios and briefing materials, at <https://nsiteam.com/sma-speaker-series/>

### SMA Publications

Available on the open Internet: <https://nsiteam.com/sma-publications/>

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For any questions, please contact Ms. Mariah Yager, J39, SMA ([mariah.c.yager.ctr@mail.mil](mailto:mariah.c.yager.ctr@mail.mil)).