

Foreword

This mid-decade review of contemporary Great Power competition is most welcome because it presents U.S. political leadership and the national security community with an opportunity to reflect on the inherent challenges in this latest round of geopolitical rivalry. Although the turn toward contestation among the United States, China, and Russia (as well as others) was formally acknowledged by Washington first in its 2017 National Security Strategy, Great Power competition had never disappeared from the international system even during the halcyon days after the Cold War's ending.

The United States then sought to consolidate its preeminence by expanding the liberal international order that had previously brought security and prosperity for its friends. Those states threatened by this objective—most prominently China and Russia, in different ways—consequently sought to resist American power and preferences. For a while, these efforts persisted amid attempts at accommodation with American primacy. But when a satisfactory equilibrium from Beijing and Moscow's perspectives could not be obtained, the desire for adaptation gradually gave way to a willingness to challenge Washington's power wherever beneficial.

Recognizing this reality confirms that even the contemporary rivalries among the United States and China and Russia have important commonalities with past Great Power competition, despite sharing important—and unique—differences that ought to matter for current U.S. national security policy. An effective policy, accordingly, must do justice to both aspects of this dichotomy.

The commonalties with past Great Power rivalries are anchored in the fact that the struggle for power is a permanent instrument for producing security and prosperity in international politics. If the international system is marked by inequalities of different kinds, with some states having supernormally more power than others, Great Power rivalries will produce *enduring* competition among them. While its manifestations may be acute at any given point in time—depending on the relative balances of capability, the ambitions of leaders, and sometimes the brute facts of geography—the existential reality of rivalry simply cannot be wished away. In that sense, the present tussles among the players are simply a continuation of the age-old interactions among self-regarding states.

Because Great Powers are essentially competing to dominate the international order—because such domination provides the greatest measure of safety in comparison to many other alternatives—their rivalries are also by definition *extensive*. The quest to get the better of the other inevitably extends to all dimensions of human activity, especially those activities affecting the production of the elements that underwrite military and economic advantages. The pervasiveness of this competition does not imply the absence of all cooperation but merely its subordination to the pursuit and protection of strategic gains. Not

surprisingly, then, as this volume illustrates, the evolving contestation among the Great Powers extends to the geographic ends of the globe. Their contestation implicates all functional areas that matter to the application of power and affects the viability of the norms and organizations that modulate the interactions among the Great Powers and others.

Finally, Great Power competition, since time immemorial and to this day, is *exclusive*: although all states are caught up in the wake of the rivalries among the well-endowed few, the contestations among the latter have a special quality that is not shared by the myriad oppositions encompassing smaller states. The scale of the violence that can be inflicted by Great Powers on one another is qualitatively different, and victory or defeat in their competition has ripple effects worldwide. Because Great Power antagonism has potentially devastating consequences, the imperatives of managing it in ways that avoid war are exceptionally pressing. It is not surprising, therefore, that the United States and its allies have sought, first and foremost, to deter China from exercising any large-scale use of force while simultaneously preventing a wider escalation even as they resist the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Although the continuities between the present challenges posed by China and Russia to the United States are thus of a piece with the past, they also embody unique differences. For starters, the competition with these three powers is occurring at a time when there has been for many decades now a growing diffusion of power within the international system. This diffusion has been a consequence of the American effort to build an open trading system since the end of World War II. Increased trade openness created a path for numerous developing economies to grow at rates faster than their industrialized peers, especially during the era of the World Trade Organization.

Although the United States still remains in a class by itself where comprehensive national power is concerned—and the international system is, accordingly, still technically unipolar—the rapid rise of China presages the possibility of asymmetric bipolarity in the foreseeable future. Moreover, the expectation that developing economies will continue to grow faster than their developed counterparts for as far as the eye can see suggests that the economic “convergence” between the West and the rest will likely continue uninterrupted. Among others, India is a conspicuous example of this convergence phenomenon.

The political consequence of this reality is that more and more nations will have strategic agency and will not be simply at the mercy of the contending Great Powers in ways that were pronounced during the last bout of Great Power competition witnessed during the historic Cold War. The United States may still be able to count on its allies for support in the evolving rivalries with China and Russia, and these Great Power antagonists will make common cause among themselves against the United States along with a handful of countries that also harbor deep grievances against Washington. But the large mass of remaining countries will flirt with the Great Powers across the grand divide depending on what their interests demand at any given moment. The boundaries among Great Power domains of influence often will remain permeable for many of the smaller states.

The United States, therefore, will be unable to rely sturdily on the allegiances of the wider international community in support of its liberal order. Although most states will continue to benefit from this system, they will freely support U.S. rivals as their circum-

stances require with significant consequences for the effectiveness of U.S. national security policy in the years ahead.

Even more consequentially, the apex Great Power rivals, the United States and China—as Russian relative power continues to decline—are now deeply intertwined with each other economically in ways that the United States and the Soviet Union were not during the years of their most intense rivalry. Because China today accounts for close to a third of the world’s manufacturing output and because the United States and China still maintain the largest trading relationship between two nations that do not share a common border, Washington and Beijing will find it difficult to “decouple” from each other however hard they try and however they attempt to package this effort.

Neither the United States nor China has faced such a situation before. Both rely on each other for increased growth and welfare—with U.S. allies relying on China even more than the United States does for their prosperity. This feature of contemporary Great Power competition creates additional intra-alliance tensions that Washington escaped when containing the former Soviet Union. All this, in toto, highlights the critical paradox. The United States *needs* trade with China and with the wider world to sustain its competitiveness and the economic advantages that benefit it in the geopolitical competition with Beijing. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same is true of China. Thus, they cannot weaken their mutual and other trade links without enfeebling themselves and undermining their ability to get the better of the other—as required by the strategic rivalry that they find themselves locked into.

Given this reality, the growing political animosity within the United States against international trade, including a neglect of the World Trade Organization system and its rules, is counterproductive for U.S. strategic competition with especially China. Washington’s effort to implement tighter export controls against China will not succeed without European and East Asian allied cooperation. Yet these nations are also adversely affected by the current U.S. disdain for global trade that their economic fortunes depend on. Squaring this circle will prove increasingly difficult in the absence of course corrections in Washington.

Because Russia lacks China’s economic centrality, isolating Moscow has proved easier during the early 2020s, but the interaction of globalization and power diffusion has enabled Russia to weaken the Western chokehold better than was expected at the start of the Ukraine war. A Russia that survives the Ukraine war unscathed as a global Great Power will pose acute dilemmas for the United States and its European alliance partners. The latter are likely to be consumed by managing the Russian threat for decades to come, while the United States focuses increasingly on China. This risks a new danger of decoupling within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization alliance, especially if emerging U.S. industrial policies coupled with tightening technology controls vis-à-vis China leave the European allies in an economic vise at precisely the time when they need to mobilize national resources to rebuild their military power vis-à-vis Russia.

Finally, the strategic rivalry that enmeshes the United States, China, and Russia is occurring at a time when there are multiple technological revolutions on the anvil, transformations that could decisively turn the balance in favor of one or the other contestant in the decades ahead. If current expectations hold, the coming breakthroughs in artificial intelligence, robotics, advanced materials, genomics and synthetic biology, and energy storage and climate mitigation technologies will create new leading sectors in the global economy.

The state that dominates these sectors will, as in times past, acquire the material wherewithal to cement (or pursue) global preeminence with enormous consequences for the character of the future international order. More pertinent, the stage is now being set for a test of two different national strategies: a state-driven effort at innovation from the top in China versus a still largely market-driven effort at innovation from the bottom in the United States. While these competing dynamics may have some similarities to the historic Cold War, the differences in economic power between China and the former Soviet Union could lead to a tighter finish this time around.

While U.S. success in the innovation race ultimately depends on the viability of the open international system—where goods, services, capital, people, and ideas can cross national borders—the outcome of the current Great Power competition will inevitably depend greatly on the future potency of American military power and the role of the United States in managing the global order. The current fractures in U.S. domestic politics do not bode well for its success in the international arena, unlike when in the Cold War there was a strong national consensus on the imperative of U.S. international leadership despite many other internal disagreements. Therefore, whether the international order underwritten by American power, which promoted Western security and prosperity, will itself hold and remain robust constitutes a profound imponderable at mid-decade. The ultimate outcome is one with enormous consequences for the prospects of U.S. success in the current contestations with China and Russia.

Both the similarities and the differences between the Great Power competitions of our own times and those going before merit careful reflection if the United States is to once again come out the winner in the current geopolitical sweepstakes. The thoughtful contributions by Thomas Lynch and his colleagues gathered together in this volume illuminate diverse facets of the complicated challenges facing the United States in the mid-2020s. They deserve careful consideration as Washington adjusts—as it must—its national strategy going forward in this evolving era of Great Power competition.

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