

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

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

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