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THE PERSISTENCE OF GREAT POWER POLITICS

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This issue's featured roundtable essay is from a roundtable on global order, great power competition, and the likelihood of war, which emerged from a colloquium hosted by Perry World House in September 2018 on the current state of the global order.

The next decade is likely to bring an intensification of great power competition. This is not a new or recent development, although Donald Trump's approach to national security has drawn attention to it:[1] Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea was evident during the Obama presidency and Russia's occupation of Crimea, of course, predates Trump's election.[2]

Nevertheless, understanding what this burgeoning competition means for global order requires answering three questions. First, what is the prognosis for great power competition in the foreseeable future? Second, is war among great powers becoming more likely or do structural or normative considerations mean the risks are being exaggerated? Third, what is the likely evolution of the international order in East Asia where China is reasserting itself? To answer these questions briefly: Great power competition is, in fact, likely to intensify in the coming years. Moreover, the risk of limited war during this period of competition will be moderately high but, nevertheless, nuclear weapons will continue to limit the likelihood that a major war will break out. Finally, the combination of a rising China and a relatively declining United States creates the possibility for much uncertainty and potential conflict in East Asia.

Why Has Great Power Competition Returned?

Over the last few decades, the United States and China have cooperated more than many theorists of international relations might expect.[3] Forging extensive economic ties has been in the interest of both countries. However, those ties have also served as the foundation for Chinese economic growth — growth that has effectively translated into military might. As I have argued elsewhere, the particular combination of American and Chinese time horizons has allowed this cooperation to flourish.[4] While Washington was focused on other short-term threats to its security, Beijing was patiently "biding its time," recognizing that its brightest days as a great power lay ahead.[5]

In recent years, this dynamic has shifted. Most importantly, for a mix of both domestic and international reasons, China has become more assertive in the South China Sea, prompting questions about its long-term intentions.[6] In turn, Washington has become increasingly nervous about the consequences of China's economic growth and military expansion, and policymakers inside the Beltway are now asking whether America's strategic approach to China has been misguided.[7] The consequence has been heightened tensions with rising concerns about the prospects for a military clash between the two countries. A more

1 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The White House, December 2017, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf.

2 "Stirring Up the South China Sea: A Fleeting Opportunity for Calm," International Crisis Group, May 7, 2015, https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/north-east-asia/china/stirring-south-china-sea-iii-fleeting-opportunity-calm; Jeffrey Mankoff, "Russia's Latest Land Grab: How Putin Won Crimea and Lost Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2014), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2014-04-17/russias-latest-land-grab.

3 Robert D. Blackwill and Ashley J. Tellis, *Revising U.S. Grand Strategy Toward China* Council on Foreign Relations, Council Special Report, no. 72 (March 2015), https://www.cfr.org/report/revising-us-grand-strategy-toward-china; John J. Mearsheimer, "Can China Rise Peacefully?" *National Interest*, Oct. 25, 2014, https://nationalinterest.org/commentary/can-china-rise-peacefully-10204.

4 David M. Edelstein, *Over the Horizon: Time, Uncertainty, and the Rise of Great Powers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017).

5 Denny Roy, *Return of the Dragon: Rising China and Regional Security*, ed. David C. Kang and Victor D. Cha (Columbia, NY: Columbia University Press, 1960), 31, chap. 2.

6 Gabriel Dominguez, "USS Decatur Has 'Unsafe' Encounter with Chinese Destroyer During South China Sea FONOP," *IHS Jane's Defense Weekly*, Oct. 2, 2018, https://www.janes.com/article/83508/uss-decatur-has-unsafe-encounter-with-chinese-destroyer-during-south-china-sea-fonop.

7 Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, "The China Reckoning," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2018), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2018-02-13/china-reckoning.

cooperative relationship might be restored if either America's or China's time horizon were to shift back to what it was, but all signs at the moment point to continuing growth in Chinese ambitions and concomitant growth in American concern.[8]

While shifting time horizons are critical to understanding the evolution of Sino-American relations, a real and perceptible decline in American relative power together with a relative rise in China's power is crucial to understanding why great power competition has returned.[9] Simplistic arguments about the "Thucydides Trap" ought to be rejected,[10] but the simple dynamics of relative power in the international system can explain a great deal. China's increase in power may very well produce fear in the United States, but the two countries can manage this shift in power dynamics in ways that will make war and peace more or less likely.[11] As the relative power of the United States declines, it may become less willing and able to defend previously defined American interests around the globe.[12] Recent history gives us two examples of this: Chastened by his experience in Libya, Barack Obama grew increasingly reluctant about projecting American power abroad, while Donald Trump has signaled a reticence about American involvement in international affairs and organizations.[13] Meanwhile, as China continues to grow it has slowly been expanding its presence throughout Asia, meeting little resistance along the

8 "The Belt and Road Initiative," The State Council, The People's Republic of China, http://english.gov.cn/beltAndRoad/.

9 Michael Auslin, et al., "Policy Roundtable: Are the United States and China in a New Cold War?" *Texas National Security Review*, May 15, 2018, https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-are-the-united-states-and-china-in-a-new-cold-war/.

10 Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (New York: Mariner Books, 2018).

11 Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

12 Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

13 Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *Atlantic* (April 2016), https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/; Griff Witte and Michael Birnbaum, "A Year of Trump's America First Agenda," *Washington Post*, Jan. 20, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/a-year-of-trumps-america-first-agenda-has-radically-changed-the-us-role-in-the-world/2018/01/20/c1258aa6-f7cf-11e7-9af7-a50bc3300042_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.f5af12940129.

way.[14] At some point, expanding Chinese interests will encounter the remnants of American interests (shrinking though they may be) and it is in these spaces that competition will occur.[15] One could tell a similar story about Russia. While Russia's relative power has not been increasing at the same rate as China's, the country has been emboldened to pursue its interests in ongoing disputes such as the Syrian civil war.[16] Where those interests butt up against American interests — for example over Iran — is where we ought to expect to see the most intense competition in the coming decade.[17]

Competition Turning Into Conflict

Is this competition likely to lead to war between the United States and China, Russia, or other countries? In short, the probability of great power war is higher now than it has been in some time, but nuclear weapons continue to limit the likelihood of a systemic great power war breaking out. However, as the United States becomes more concerned about Chinese intentions and as Beijing becomes more focused on short-term targets of opportunities in the South China Sea and elsewhere, the probability of conflict rises.[18] Where war is most likely to occur is through a process of alliance entrapment, a potentially volatile scenario that has been underappreciated by advocates of an American-led, global international order. Skeptics of entrapment have typically pointed to the experience of the Cold War to argue that the likelihood of great powers becoming entrapped by their weaker allies is limited.[19] During the Cold War, however, both the United States and the Soviet Union defined their interests globally, making it difficult for either to be entrapped into a conflict it had not defined as part of its interests. Today, the United States may be more tempted to define its interests more narrowly even as it recognizes the risk posed by a rising China. The result is a higher likelihood of American entrapment in conflicts it might otherwise prefer to avoid.

Such entrapment is a particular risk for great powers like the United States that remain absolutely powerful but are arguably in relative decline. The United States has an interest in not seeing China become a hegemonic power in East Asia. At the same time, the United States is not likely to confront China directly over its growing interests and aspirations in the region. The anticipated costs of direct conflict between the two countries are likely sufficient to dissuade either side from initiating such a war. Instead, conflict is more likely to emerge when a friend or ally of the United States — such as Vietnam, the Philippines, or Japan — finds itself in a crisis with Beijing. Washington will be tempted to intervene on behalf of these friends in order to put the brakes on any growing Chinese influence in the region. Dangerously, smaller powers may be tempted to provoke China precisely to generate this American response. Military clashes in the waters of East and Southeast Asia are relatively easy to envision, and have already occurred in recent decades — consider, for example, the Mischief Reef disputes in the 1990s, or the Scarborough Shoal incident in the 2000s.[20]

Fortunately, such clashes are likely to remain limited in scale. While some worry that innovations in nuclear weapons technology have made such weapons more usable and more practical in the conduct of warfare, the dynamics of escalation from the use of a small, low-yield nuclear weapon are still difficult to predict.[21] The dangers of a catastrophic nuclear conflagration will continue to place a lid on any possible future conflicts between the United States and China. Importantly, however, the risks of continuous crises and skirmishes are significant — and escalation is possible.[22]

14 Derek Lundy, "How to Respond to China's 'Salami Tactics' in South China Sea," *National Interest*, July 11, 2016), https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/how-respond-chinas-salami-tactics-south-china-sea-16914.

15 Jennifer Lind, "Life in China's Asia," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2018), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-02-13/life-chinas-asia.

16 "Russia Says 63,000 Troops Have Seen Combat in Syria," *BBC News*, Aug. 23, 2018, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45284121.

17 Peter Layton, "To Engage China, or Balance It?" *War on the Rocks*, July 20, 2018, https://warontherocks.com/2018/07/to-engage-china-or-balance-it-lessons-from-a-failed-grand-strategic-exercise/.

18 Edelstein, *Over the Horizon*.

19 Michael Beckley, "The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Security Risks of U.S. Defense Pacts," *International Security* 39, no. 4 (Spring 2015): 7–48, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00197; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *America Abroad: Why the Sole Superpower Should Not Pull Back from the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

20 Steve Mollman, "Photos: How a 'Fishermen's Shelter' on Stilts Became a Chinese Military Base" *Quartz*, Dec. 15, 2016), https://qz.com/863811/mischief-reef-how-a-fishermens-shelter-on-stilts-became-a-chinese-military-base-in-the-south-china-sea/; Richard Heydarian, "How the Scarborough Shoal Came Back to Haunt China-Philippines Relations," *South China Morning Post*, June 23, 2018, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2151923/how-scarborough-shoal-came-back-haunt-china-philippines.

21 Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The New Era of Counterforce: Technological Change and the Future of Nuclear Deterrence," *International Security* 41, no. 4 (Spring 2017): 9–49, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00273.

22 Aaron Miles, "Escalation Dominance in America's Oldest New Nuclear Strategy," *War on the Rocks*, Sept. 12, 2018), https://warontherocks.com/2018/09/escalation-dominance-in-americas-oldest-new-nuclear-strategy/.

The Future of the Asian Order

An emerging structure of the Asian international order may take some time to become evident, but what might that order look like? First, the U.S. commitment to East Asia is more likely to weaken than to strengthen. If America's relative power continues to decline compared to China's, it will be difficult for the United States to sustain a presence in East Asia that is more reassuring than it is dangerous.[23] Second, China is likely to become a more dominant presence in the region. While smaller powers may pursue various strategies to constrain assertions of Chinese power, their options will be limited, especially if the United States signals that it is unwilling to be drawn into a war in East Asia. One ought to expect to see efforts by some smaller powers in the region to balance against an increasingly assertive China, but other countries may also pursue opportunities to benefit from cooperation with China, despite the threat China might pose over the long term.

Just how much China would seek to disrupt the existing international order remains unclear. China has certainly benefited from an international order that has allowed it to prosper from relatively open trade with other countries. At the same time, China is less enamored of other aspects of the so-called "liberal international order," including the promotion of democracy. While China may desire a dominant position in East Asia, it is unclear how concerned Beijing might be about the prospects of South Korea or Japan were they unconstrained by their American ally. In short, reactions to a Chinese revision of the international order may be enthusiastic in some areas, but they may be more reluctant in others. Beijing's ability to carry through such revisions to the order will depend on its ability to combine coercion and persuasion in its relations with other countries in Asia and beyond. The more it has to rely on coercion, the more likely conflict between China and its neighbors — as well as other great powers — becomes. In short, little is foreordained about the nature of a Chinese-led international order. How such an order is likely to evolve depends on Chinese preferences and behavior, but also on how others react to its efforts to shape the East Asian order.

Conclusion

In short, great power competition has never gone away in the way that many had hoped in the years following the end of the Cold War.[24] Such competition was certainly muted during this era, when American power was predominant, Russia was in decline, and China's rise was in its nascent stages. But all of that has changed now. The United States is in relative decline, Russia is resurgent, and China has acquired the capabilities to act more assertively. At the same time, the time horizons of all of these powers may be shifting in foreboding ways: The United States is becoming more attentive to the long-term threats of these great powers, while both China and Russia become more assertive in the short term, which will, in turn, provoke more long-term concerns in Washington. The implications are likely to be more competition and, indeed, the possibility of great power war.[25] Nuclear weapons may very well provide insurance against the outbreak of a catastrophic war, but the dangers of smaller conflicts — and the ways in which they might escalate — are significant and worrisome. How to prevent great power competition from escalating to great power conflict is sure to be one of the significant challenges of the coming years for policymakers and scholars alike.

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23 Michael Beckley, *Unrivaled: Why America Will Remain the World's Sole Superpower* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

24 Jessica Tuchman Mathews, "Redefining Security," *Foreign Affairs* 68, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 162–77, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20043906.

25 Peter Mattis, "From Engagement to Rivalry: Tools to Compete with China," *Texas National Security Review* 1, no. 4 (August 2018), https://tnsr.org/2018/08/from-engagement-to-rivalry-tools-to-compete-with-china/.