



The New Era of Great Power Competition

11

Emerging Patterns and Principles

By Dr Thomas F. Lynch III

National Defense University

Note: This article is an abridged version of 'The New Era of Great Power Competition and the Biden Administration', published in Joint Force Quarterly, N° 103, 4th Quarter 2021.

Introduction

The administration of President Joseph Biden began in early 2021 amid daunting domestic challenges and an evolving era of Great Power Competition (GPC). This era, emerging since 2008, evident since 2014, and on full display since 2017 – features a three-state GPC where the United States, China, and Russia joust for international status and power, and where the trajectory of relative power from a long-dominant America to either rival remains incomplete and far from certain.¹ [...]. This article [...] offers a collection of observations about the evolving new era of GPC that extend and expand on the insights about past and contemporary GPC found in Strategic Assessment 2020: Into a New Era of Great Power Competition

(NDU Press, 2020)² [...] summarizes and applies four historic GPC principles critical to [...] success in the competitive Great Power dyad with China:

- firmness with flexibility
- partnerships, alliances, and alternative geometries
- leaders vs. peoples and the poison of mass denigration
- playing for time.

[...]

Relevant History and Contemporary Dynamics

The contemporary era is [...] characterized by heightened competition between more than two Great Powers. This makes it like most eras of GPC over the past 500 years, but distinct from the most recent period of Great Power competition: a bipolar Great Power rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union that played out over a 45-year Cold War. In previous multi-polar Great Power competitions, rivalries dyads ebbed and flowed. These dyads normally involved a rising power and a dominant one, raising the strategic question about the inevitability of relative power decline by the dominant state and a power transition between them. Great Power transitions challenge rising states with the dilemma of how to assert their relative power gains without provoking an outright clash with the dominant state. Transition also confronts the dominant, but relatively declining state with the vexing question of whether its rising challenger can be accommodated in a manner that avoids destructive military clashes and an unacceptable change in the status quo. These transitions play out over decades and centuries, not years.³

Although three-quarters of Great Power transitions since 1500 have featured a destructive period of war between the contestants, this outcome

is not foreordained.⁴ Great Power competitors joined in a relative power transition can culminate their interactions with accommodation or acquiescence short of war. However, the deck is stacked against such a benign end state. Peaceful Great Power transition outcomes require hard work and astute leadership. When one or both sides in a relative power transition dyad recognize a shift in the relative alignment of economic and military power moving decisively against it, it is much more inclined to risk a pre-emptive conflict than when it perceives a stable power status quo. For the most part, the United States and Soviet Union perceived a relatively stable power balance during the Cold War, and that intense bipolar era of Great Power competition ended peacefully. [...]

The US-China Competitive Dyad

The Sino-American competitive dyad is likely to be a dominant Great Power rivalry well into the future.⁵ It is the modern competitive dyad most fraught with the dangerous dynamics of Great Power transition, although any misstep leading to accidental war with Russia would be enormously destructive and consequential, especially if Russia escalated to a nuclear weapons threat or use to end a conventional conflict. While some Western pundits stoke fears of an imminent and disastrous power shift in favour of China on the horizon, a net power comparison between the United States and China indicates that the power transition timeline is longer than some now fear.⁶ Properly understood, this elongated timeline affords China and the United States time to better appreciate the risks of unbridled rivalry and seek a path of modulated competition with elements of confrontation and collaboration underpinning the search for mutually acceptable strategic outcomes. [...]

An America that competes smartly with China in an era of multipolar Great Power competition must understand both the value of time and where it

can leverage its major advantages. [...] America [ha] s relative advantages in ideas, information dissemination, political and military alliances, and conventional military power when applied away from regions of local Chinese advantage inform where the United States can build on strength. [...]

Four Competitive Principles

A study of historic Great Power dyadic rivals offers several principles that can enable effective American competition with China while minimizing the prospect of Great Power transition collapsing into Great Power war.⁷ Four of these historical principles stand out: firmness with flexibility; partnerships, alliances, and alternative geometries; leaders vs peoples and the poison of mass denigration; and playing for time.

Firmness with Flexibility

Firstly, to be successful, the dominant Great Power must [...] clearly signal the strategic aims it will defend at all costs and then offer the prospect of dialogue on those it may be willing to negotiate. While firm on its non-negotiable aims, it should be flexible in finding issues and venues where win-win outcomes are possible. For example, at the turn of the 19th century, the United Kingdom (UK) accepted American primacy in the western Atlantic as a better path to sustaining high seas primacy on vital routes for its Middle Eastern and Asian colonies – and preferable to naval confrontation in recognition of growing American power. At the same time, the rising United States came to accept the once-abhorrent British monarchy in recognition of growing political enfranchisement for a great number of UK citizens.⁸ [...]

Flexibility must be paired with firm resolve. Strong security arrangements, backed by formidable US military power, might harden feelings of antago-

nisms and suspicion, but they are indispensable to preserving the peace with China.⁹ [...] The United States also can firmly support democratic institutions, individual liberties, and human rights in its alliances and in its interactions with China while demonstrating flexibility in pursuing aspirations for Chinese political reform. [...] During the Cold War, US efforts to strengthen non-communist elements within the Soviet bloc often met with frustration in the near term. [...] But over the long term, and especially after the Helsinki Accords of 1975, these activities gave hope to those labouring for a freer future behind Moscow's Iron Curtain. American support for democracy and liberty in regions around the world during the 1970s and 1980s made the global ideological climate steadily less friendly to the Soviet Union's repressive regime.¹⁰ This kind of Cold War competitive mind-set is applicable for competition with China today and must be melded with modern, collective approaches that portray Chinese political and ideological representations as inappropriate. Now, as then, a large amount of America's appeal is the power of an uncensored world.¹¹

Partnerships, Alliances, and Alternative Geometries

History demonstrates that the dominant Great Power must look to build and maintain durable, reciprocal interstate alliances that provide would-be partners with alternatives to the either-or choices posed by a hard-charging rival.¹² Great Britain was right to seek strategic partnerships and allies in its rivalry with Napoleonic France, parlaying these alliances into first containment of the threat and later its defeat. Napoleon took a less collaborative and ultimately failed approach of largely relying on territorial conquest and installation of family members in positions of political power to expand French national power and aspects of the French Revolution.¹³

Today, the United States has a far greater base for building economic and military partnerships than any Great Power in modern history. It also

confronts a rising Great Power in China with little experience or inclination in this area. The United States has invested in critical global alliances and partnerships over the years for precisely this kind of moment. [...] Many of America's eager partners are today apprehensive about the recent unpredictability of US foreign policy conduct. [...] They want a United States that views commitment to rules-based international order and institutions to be less like self-imposed shackles and more like a truly competitive advantage.¹⁴ To be fully competitive with China, American policy must [...] practice a competitive foreign policy that views alliances as assets to be invested in rather than costs to be cut.¹⁵

Leaders vs. Peoples and the Poison of Mass Denigration

Thirdly, successful Great Power competition, short of a direct military clash, is extremely unlikely if the rivals descend into a poisonous, open, and reciprocal denigration of each other's people. The choice to criticize the government of a rival state while distinguishing it from the people is not as risky, although a tightrope must be walked to maintain the difference. Once the British and Imperial German press went after the character of each other's societies, the march towards World War I accelerated.¹⁶ So too, World War II in the Pacific loomed ominously once the United States and Tojo's Japan devolved into mutual societal recrimination played out in newspapers and journal articles.¹⁷ In contrast, the American government's conscious Cold War effort to distinguish between the Soviet Union's communist party and the Russian people, reserving greatest criticism toward the party and offering outreach to its people, generated a far different result. [...]

A responsible American program of communication should concentrate on countering Chinese Communist Party (CCP) driven disinformation.¹⁸ [...] At the same time, the United States should try to maximize positive interactions and experiences with the Chinese people. The United States and its free-and-open partner states should consider issuing more visas

and providing paths to citizenship for more Chinese, with proper security safeguards in place. Chinese who engage with citizens of free countries are the ones who are most likely to question their government's policies, either from abroad or when they return home. With this approach, the United States would do what it did with expatriate Russian communities during the Cold War: view Chinese expatriate communities as valuable citizens while discriminating between Ministry of State security agents for expulsion.¹⁹

Play for Time

Finally, some argue that time works in favour of the rising Great Power in a competitive dyad, putting the dominant Great Power at dire risk if it does not take swift confrontational action while its relative power is high. However, this thesis rests on at least two dubious assumptions: that the rising power's ascent is likely to be rapid and that the rising power will continue to ascend in a mainly linear fashion and not confront problems or challenges along the way. In the present moment, the critical factors [...] work in favour of the United States.²⁰ [...] At the same time, a US conclusion that China is destined for global dominance, especially in the near term, is both unsupported by the facts and likely to generate strategic overreaction.²¹ China's economic rise will make it a long-term challenge for the United States to manage rather than one to be conquered or converted.²²

Policies That Fit into the Geopolitical Realities of GPC

The United States and China are destined for a lengthy, uneasy co-existence, not decoupling or appeasement.²³ Thus, as American resilience and regeneration to confront a great challenge emerges anew, a US strategy, featuring a competitive mind-set, that plays for time as China's contradictions grow, seems best suited for successful contemporary Great Power

competition.²⁴ The Biden administration's March 2021 INSSG demonstrates an understanding of these geopolitical realities of contemporary GPC and has presented a new array of policies to meet them:

The most effective way for America to out-compete a more assertive and authoritarian China over the long-term is to invest in our people, our economy, and our democracy. By restoring US credibility and reasserting forward-looking global leadership, we will ensure that America, not China, sets the international agenda, working alongside others to shape new global norms and agreements that advance our interests and reflect our values. By bolstering and defending our unparalleled network of allies and partners, and making smart defence investments, we will also deter Chinese aggression and counter threats to our collective security, prosperity, and democratic way of life.²⁵

It remains to be seen how well the Biden administration can put these principles into practice in the face of domestic political headwinds and distracting international challenges.

Dr Thomas F. Lynch III, Colonel (ret.) joined the INSS after a 28-year career in the active duty U.S. Army, serving in a variety of command and staff positions as an armour/cavalry officer and as a senior level politico-military analyst. Dr Lynch is a member of the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and an adjunct professor in the Security Studies Program in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. He holds a B.S. from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, a Master's in Public Administration (MPA) and a Masters (MA) & PhD in International Relations from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University.

Endnotes

1. For an operational definition of a Great Power and the criteria met by China, Russia, and the United States today that make them the three modern Great Powers, see Thomas F. Lynch III, 'Introduction', in Thomas F. Lynch III, ed., *Strategic Assessment 2020: Into a New Era of Great Power Competition* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2020), 1–15, available at <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2404286/1-introduction/>.
2. For a detailed listing of these major insights, see 'Major Findings on Contemporary Great Power Competition', in Lynch, *Strategic Assessment 2020*, xv–xxvii, available at <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2404283/major-findings-on-contemporary-great-power-competition/>.
3. Kurt M. Campbell and Jake Sullivan, 'Competition Without Catastrophe: How America Can Both Challenge and Coexist with China', *Foreign Affairs* (September/ October 2019), available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/competition-with-china-without-catastrophe>.
4. *Ibid.*
5. China does not possess and is unlikely to attain sufficient power assets in the coming decade to enable a strategy of remaking the international order in its favour before domestic risk factors collapse Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule even if that was its actual strategy. See Lynch and Saunders, 'Contemporary Great Power Geostrategic Dynamics: Competitive Elements and Tool Sets', in Lynch, *Strategic Assessment 2020*, 97–99. For an opposite view that asserts China possesses a global grand strategy aspiring for leadership of a new tributary system soon to be resourced through a massive effort organized under three overlapping policies, carrying the names 'Made in China 2025', 'Belt and Road Initiative', and 'Military-Civil Fusion', see H. R. McMaster, 'How China Sees the World: And How We Should See China', *The Atlantic*, May 2020, available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/05/mcmaster-china-strategy/609088/>.
6. Michael Beckley, 'The Power of Nations: Measuring What Matters', *International Security* 43, no. 2 (Fall 2018), 22–25; Lynch and Saunders, 'Contemporary Great Power Geostrategic Dynamics: Competitive Elements and Tool Sets', in Lynch, *Strategic Assessment 2020*, 96–97.
7. For an overview of these main principles based upon comparative historical case studies, see Lynch and Hoffman, 'Past Eras of Great Power Competition', in Lynch, *Strategic Assessment 2020*, 36–38.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Charles Edel and Hal Brands, 'The Real Origins of the U.S.–China Cold War', *Foreign Policy*, 2 June 2019, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/02/the-real-origins-of-the-u-s-china-cold-war-big-think-communism/>.
10. Edel and Brands, 'The Real Origins of the U.S.–China Cold War'.
11. Osnos, 'The Future of America's Contest with China'.
12. Choosing proper allies also was a competitive mindset success for the United States during the Cold War. See Stephen M. Walt, 'Yesterday's Cold War Shows How to Beat China Today', *Foreign Policy*, 29 July 2019, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/29/yesterday-cold-war-shows-how-to-beat-china-today/>.
13. Michael Broers, 'Pride and Prejudice: The Napoleonic Empire Through the Eyes of Its Rulers', in *Napoleon's Empire: European Politics in Global Perspective*, ed. Ute Planert (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 307–317; Michael V. Leggiere, 'Enduring Strategic Rivalries: Great Britain vs. France During the French Wars (1792–1815)', in *Great Strategic Rivalries: From the Classical World to the Cold War*, ed. James Lacey (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 289–390.
14. 'Don't Be Fooled by the Trade Deal Between America and China', *The Economist*, 2 January 2020, available at <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2020/01/02/dont-be-fooled-by-the-trade-deal-between-america-and-china>.
15. Campbell and Sullivan, 'Competition Without Catastrophe', 110.
16. Lynch and Hoffman, 'Past Eras of Great Power Competition', in Lynch, *Strategic Assessment 2020*, 29.
17. *Ibid.* 34, 37.

The New Era of Great Power Competition

18. For details on the organizations involved in international propaganda and influence activities, see appendix 1 in Larry Diamond and Orville Schell, eds., *China's Influence & American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2019), 133–141. Some former policymakers specifically focus on the Chinese Ministry of State Security, the United Front Work Department, and the Chinese Students and Scholars Association as ones for attention to counter CCP-driven propaganda. See H. R. McMaster, 'How China Sees the World'.
19. Proper 'safeguards' for Chinese student, teacher, and research visas should include tight limitations on Confucius Institutes in the United States to eliminate their revealed role in espionage, monitoring, and thought-policing on behalf of the CCP. The ideas for an American strategy valuing the Chinese people, while holding the CCP to account, include those found in McMaster, 'How China Sees the World'.
20. Strategic patience during the Cold War also was an American competitive mindset virtue. See Walt, 'Yesterday's Cold War Shows How to Beat China Today'.
21. For similar conclusions, see Joseph S. Nye, Jr., 'Power and Interdependence with China', *The Washington Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (2020), 13; Wynne, 'How to Think About Potentially Decoupling from China', 50–52.
22. Osnos, 'The Future of America's Contest with China'; Martin Wolf, 'The Looking 100-Year U.S.-China Conflict', *Financial Times*, 4 June 2019.
23. Osnos, 'The Future of America's Contest with China'.
24. For a detailed assessment of options for a U.S. strategic mindset for competition with China, see Frank G. Hoffman, 'U.S. Strategies for Competing Against China', in Lynch, *Strategic Assessment 2020*, 289–308, available at <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2404635/14-us-strategies-for-competing-against-china/>. For an overview of some of the Biden administration planned initiatives to renew and improve American productivity and poise it for vigorous, successful technological and strategic competition with China into the future, see Fact Sheet: The American Jobs Plan (Washington, DC: The White House, 31 March 2021), available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/31/fact-sheet-the-american-jobs-plan/>.
25. Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, 20.

This Page Intentionally Left Blank.