

November/December Topic Analysis

Resolved: The United States' strategy of Great Power Competition produces more benefits than harms.

Definitions:

Great Power Competition: There isn't necessarily one strict definition of Great Power Competition (or GPC). The [Modern War Institute](#) outlines the difficulty of trying to narrow this concept down to one specific thing, but settles on the idea that, at its essence, it represents the general competition the US undertakes on the international stage with its primary geopolitical rivals, which at present are China and Russia. This has been outlined in the National Defense Strategy as an important component of US foreign policy.

United States: Obviously, this term doesn't require a formal definition. However, it is important to note that the US is the actor in the resolution, but the resolution itself doesn't necessarily scope the impacts solely to the US. Therefore, teams should consider whether they want to examine this as benefits and harms to the US or the world, and what justifications they have for their chosen scope.

Background:

When then-Defense Secretary James Mattis published the 2017 National Defense Strategy, he announced that Great Power Competition was now the “primary focus of US national security.”¹ For most of the 20th century, the US was locked in some form of a Great Power Competition - first with Germany in WWII, and then with the Soviet Union in the Cold War. We now find ourselves returning to this political philosophy in assessing how to deal with the looming threats of China and Russia on the international stage.

China and Russia are growing increasingly more powerful and influential as they continue to challenge the US’ geopolitical dominance. China is able to effectively challenge the US in many different spheres of influence, from economic to militaristic, and Russia, while declining in military might, has the threat of volatility and nuclear weapons that must be considered.² This has led to apprehension from all parties when trying to collaborate or make compromises, as Russia and China view the US as a sort of enemy, and vice versa. To provide some exact statistics on this, 82% of Americans have an unfavorable view of China, and 70% of Americans see Russia as an enemy.³

This topic presents a fascinating and nuanced look into global conflict and the influence of major powers on other countries. Teams on both sides of the resolution will want to establish a clear foreign policy goal that the US should aim to maintain through its actions. Is it more important to maintain world peace or spread US ideals of democracy and antiauthoritarianism? Are we more likely to see tension in a world where the US doesn’t challenge the power and influence of Russia and China? What would be the impact of a Russo-Chinese alliance, and how can we best prevent this from occurring? These are all important questions that teams will want to consider in thinking about their strategies for either side of the resolution.

For clarity and depth of argumentation, this month’s topic analysis is structured a little differently than usual. On each side of the resolution, the arguments are broken into the effects on the US and the effects on other countries. Each paragraph within those sections represents a different branch of argumentation. Hopefully this helps to display the arguments a little more clearly!

¹ Friedman, Uri. "The New Concept Everyone in Washington Is Talking About." The Atlantic. 6 Aug. 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/08/what-genesis-great-power-competition/595405/>

² Cordesman, Anthony H. "Ranking the World’s Major Powers: A Graphic Comparison of the United." Center for Strategic and International Studies. 16 May 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/ranking-worlds-major-powers-graphic-comparison-united-states-russia-china-and-other>

³ Rising, David and Moritsugu, Ken. "Survey: Americans Increasingly See China as a Threat." The Diplomat. 29 Apr. 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/04/survey-americans-increasingly-see-china-as-a-threat/>

Aff Arguments:

Benefits to the US

Preventing Russo-Chinese Alliance

Some have argued that without a strategy of Great Power Competition, the US would be pushing Russia and China to work more closely with one another. Severing economic ties with China is likely to hurt them financially in the short term, but in the long term, it would result in a China that is less reliant on the US, and therefore is freer to develop relationships with whomever it would like to.⁴

Combatting Russian and Chinese Influence

Since the end of the Cold War, the US has been the dominant player on the international stage. Now that Russia and China have been building up their troops and expanding their military capabilities, they are seemingly more comfortable with asserting their position on international conflicts. The world is in a time of renewed tumult, and it is seeming increasingly likely that we are on the verge of war. Russia's threats against the Baltic states hold more weight after their invasion of Ukraine, and China's tensions with Taiwan look more threatening every day.⁵ In addition, China and Russia actively advocate for the spread of their authoritarian power across the globe, and the US has an obligation to counter this and advocate for democracy.⁶

Benefits to other countries

Foreign Assistance

US competition with China on the international stage has had a great deal of benefits to other countries. One key area of competition between these nations is foreign assistance, specifically in terms of investment. The US has a competitive advantage over China in terms of its structure of assistance; where China works primarily with the national government of a country, the US works on more localized levels, allowing them to better help the communities

⁴ Friedman, Uri. "The New Concept Everyone in Washington Is Talking About." The Atlantic. 6 Aug. 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/08/what-genesis-great-power-competition/595405/>

⁵ Tugendhat, Tom. "Britain After Ukraine." Foreign Affairs. 14 Sept. 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-kingdom/tom-tugendhat-britain-after-ukraine>

⁶ Twining, Daniel and Quirk, Patrick. "Fighting Back: How Democracies Can Check Authoritarian Aggression." The National Interest. 11 Jul. 2022. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/fighting-back-how-democracies-can-check-authoritarian-aggression-203467>

they are working to provide assistance to.⁷ Many countries that China has provided assistance to, either through its Belt and Road Initiative or otherwise, are stuck in so-called “debt traps,” owing a great deal of money to the Chinese government. In fact, about 37% of the amount owed in debt service payments by the 74 lowest-income countries is owed to China.⁸

Avoidance of Conflict

While it’s difficult to argue that a GPC strategy wouldn’t lead to an increase in tensions between the great powers, it can be argued that this tension won’t result in any kind of substantial conflict between nations, and will more so function as a check on the other nations. The US and its allies still dominate defense spending and global share of GDP, and there are common goals shared by the US and the other major powers - nuclear deterrence, economic interdependence, etc. - that would prevent tensions from escalating into a full-on conflict.⁹ Some have argued, however, that the reason China and Russia have become such dominant players on the international stage is that the US has backed away from countering them to the best of its ability.¹⁰ If the US is unable to effectively counter China and Russia now, it runs the risk of a much larger conflict in the future.¹¹

A Freer World

Some policy analysts have argued that the US’ stance of GPC and refusal to accommodate China and Russia’s demands has resulted in a more open, collaborative, and free world. Accommodating the demands of China and Russia and backing away from conflict would have meant ignoring their efforts to undermine Western news media and NGOs, and would have reverted the globe to a time of spheres of influence.¹² The US strategy of GPC is necessary

⁷ Savoy, Conor and Staguhn, Janina. "Global Development in an Era of Great Power Competition." Center for Strategic and International Studies. 24 Mar. 2022. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/global-development-era-great-power-competition>

⁸ Gold, Shabtai. "China is owed 37% of poor countries' debt payments in 2022: World Bank." Devex. 19 Jan. 2022. <https://www.devex.com/news/sponsored/china-is-owed-37-of-poor-countries-debt-payments-in-2022-world-bank-102463>

⁹ Brands, Hal. "Six Propositions about Great Power Competition and Revisionism in the 21st Century." University of Pennsylvania. 1 Jan. 2020. <https://global.upenn.edu/sites/default/files/go-six-propositions-brands.original.pdf>

¹⁰ McMaster, H. R. and Scheinmann, Gabriel. "U.S. Restraint Has Created an Unstable and Dangerous World." Foreign Policy. 17 Jun. 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/17/us-military-strategy-geopolitics-restraint-russia-china-ukraine-war/>

¹¹ Kagan, Robert. "The Price of Hegemony." Foreign Affairs. 23 May 2022. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-04-06/russia-ukraine-war-price-hegemony>

¹² Wright, Thomas. "The return to great-power rivalry was inevitable." Brookings. 12 Sept. 2018. <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-return-to-great-power-rivalry-was-inevitable/>

to combat some of the neo-authoritarian goals of these two countries. On top of this, the international community will be looking more towards morally justifiable positions. If the US engages China and Russia in this way, the conflict will have an important component regarding gaining the moral high ground, which would force Russia and China, as well as the US, to undertake more morally correct practices.¹³

¹³ Magdin, Radu. "Competitive storytelling amid great power competition." Asia Times. 4 Sep. 2019.
<https://asiatimes.com/2019/09/competitive-storytelling-amid-great-power-competition/>

Neg Arguments:

Harms to the US

Encourages Russo-Chinese Alliance

Many analysts have argued that the US' strategy of GPC alienates it from Russia and China and provides them with common ground, which in turn pushes them to work more closely together. The way that the US enforces GPC groups China and Russia together as a collective opponent, even though they are immensely different.¹⁴ This grouping is likely to facilitate cooperation between the two nations. This is something we have already observed under this strategy; China and Russia have been cooperating in recent years, and they have conducted a joint air patrol in the Asia-Pacific.¹⁵ China and Russia have developed their relationship so much in the past few years that they can be considered to be informal allies.¹⁶ As the US continues to pursue this strategy of containment and confrontation, China and Russia are likely to cooperate more frequently and to an even higher degree.¹⁷

Exacerbated Arms Race

Great power competition has one very clear issue that can be found in its name: competition. When the US works to counter Russia and China, those countries want to fight back, and all parties end up locked in some advanced form of an arms race. Over the past couple of decades, the US has worked to assert itself as the global hegemon. In this time, China has focused on improving its own abilities, increasing its military capabilities in many domains, including land, sea, space, and cyber.¹⁸ As Russia and China have gotten stronger, the US'

¹⁴ Wyne, Ali. "America's Blind Ambition Could Make It a Victim of Global Competition." The National Interest. 11 Feb. 2019. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/americas-blind-ambition-could-make-it-victim-global-competition-44227>

¹⁵ Bhadrakumar, M.K. "Militaries of Russia, China getting closer." Asia Times. 31 Jul. 2019. <https://asiatimes.com/2019/07/militaries-of-russia-china-getting-closer/>

¹⁶ Shidore, Sarang. "Vostok military exercises indicate that Russia is far from isolated." Responsible Statecraft. 1 Sept. 2022. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/09/01/vostok-military-exercises-indicate-that-russia-is-far-from-isolated/>

¹⁷ Matlock Jr., Jack F. "Why the US must press for a ceasefire in Ukraine." Responsible Statecraft. 17 Oct. 2022. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/10/17/on-ukraine-the-us-is-on-the-hook-to-find-a-way-out/>

¹⁸ Gilsinan, Kathy. "How the U.S. Could Lose a War With China." The Atlantic. 25 Jul. 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/07/china-us-war/594793/>

position on the international stage has weakened, and the US is no longer in a steady position to enter a new Cold War.¹⁹

Harms to other countries

Global Cooperation

As the world becomes increasingly more globalized, there are common threats that unite countries across the planet and require a level of international cooperation to effectively address. We have witnessed a few of these at the forefront of global consciousness in the past few years, between efforts to combat climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. At times when the world's most powerful countries should be working together to find solutions to our global problems, tensions between them make it impossible to address these challenges as a united front, even when it is in their best interest.²⁰

Foreign Assistance

In times of crisis, it can be immensely beneficial for the world's strongest countries to work together in providing relief to other nations. These countries also have the ability to influence the ways in which foreign assistance is offered, and can ensure it is offered in a responsible and equitable way. The US' characterization of China as a great evil that seeks to harm the countries it works with undermines any ability the US would otherwise have to convince China to amend and improve any abusive practices, and puts the leaders of the third-party countries in a difficult situation where they feel they have to choose between the two nations.²¹ This makes it difficult for the US to effectively aid other countries, particularly those who need it most.

Proxy Wars

As Russia and China have emerged as global superpowers, they have increasingly turned to other countries to challenge the US/Western agenda internationally, leading to proxy wars. A proxy war occurs when a major power instigates or involves itself in a conflict, but leaves the

¹⁹ Pillar, Paul R. "How Will the New Cold War With Russia End?" The National Interest. 9 Jul. 2022.

<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-will-new-cold-war-russia-end-203471>

²⁰ Haass, Richard. "The Dangerous Decade." Foreign Affairs. 13 Sept. 2022.

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/dangerous-decade-foreign-policy-world-crisis-richard-haass>

²¹ Swaine, Michael D. and Werner, Jake. "How Biden's New National Security Strategy Gets China Wrong." The National Interest. 13 Oct. 2022. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-biden%E2%80%99s-new-national-security-strategy-gets-china-wrong-205323>

brunt of the fighting to another group or country.²² China and Russia have a history of supporting proxies in order to further their own interests while combating US interests, whether in Syria, Ukraine, or on the Korean peninsula.²³ Russia's Foreign Minister recently accused the US and NATO of waging a proxy war on them through Ukraine, which has given them the justification to deepen ties with China and Middle Eastern nations.²⁴

²² Byman, Daniel L.. "Why engage in proxy war? A state's perspective." Brookings. 21 May 2018.

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/05/21/why-engage-in-proxy-war-a-states-perspective/>

²³ Hoffman, Frank. "The Return of Great-Power Proxy Wars." War on the Rocks. 2 Sept. 2021.

<https://warontherocks.com/2021/09/the-return-of-great-power-proxy-wars/>

²⁴ Carnegie Middle East Center. "The U.S. and Russia in Ukraine: A Proxy War?" Carnegie Middle East Center. 13 Jul. 2022. <https://carnegie-mec.org/2022/07/13/u.s.-and-russia-in-ukraine-proxy-war-event-7908>