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China in an Age of Great Power Competition

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SYNOPSIS

*Competition is now the primary character of US-China relations. Yet this is hardly anomalous from the longer lens of great power history. Addressing some of the key factors and considerations on both sides that contribute to the current fractious state of relations, **HOO TIANG BOON** finds that the US-China rivalry is becoming entrenched as a structural condition of the international system.*

COMMENTARY

There has been much talk about the “[age](#)” or “[return](#)” of great power competition in the international system. This characterisation belies the point that there have always been varying degrees of contestation among the great powers of the day, and that such competition is normal from a historical perspective. Notwithstanding America’s relative unipolar moment after the end of the Cold War, the past 200 years of history are essentially dotted with conflicts among the great powers.

From that perspective, the international system is reverting to a more normal state of affairs.

Entrenched Rivalry

Consequently, those hoping for a fundamental reset in US-China relations – akin to the 1970s rapprochement – will be disappointed. Strategic rivalry is now the primary shape of relations between China and the United States, with their competition spanning the key contours of the international system: economics, ideology, politics, military and technology.

The present strategic context between the two powers does not bode well too. The key factor that bonded China and the United States during their 1970s rapprochement was a shared perception of the security threat from the Soviet Union. That *raison d'être* receded with the end of the Cold War and the latter's dissolution. Ever since then, both sides have struggled to locate a common strategic motive to underpin relations.

Initially, economics was a key logic and glue sustaining American efforts to engage and integrate China into the US-led global order. Today, it is increasingly the source of fracture, as exemplified by the ongoing bilateral trade and technological conflict that shows little sign of abating. Rightly or wrongly, perceptions in the United States that China's rise has come at the expense of the American economy remain pervasive. What is more, economic motivations are being superseded by political logics in the United States that prioritise national security over costs and efficiencies.

At the political level, many American elites held the tacit belief that as China became more capitalistic, sooner or later, political freedoms would follow. When that did not happen – and even worse, a more tightly controlled and globally assertive China emerged under Xi Jinping – many Americans started wondering whether it was in their country's interests to continue engaging China in ways that effectively supported the economic rise of a political and ideological rival.

These factors, among others, have led to the current point where Washington has decided that it would be futile to ["change"](#) China; rather, it would do all it can to ensure China does not emerge victorious in a perceived competition for global primacy. Ideologically, the Biden administration has pitched its rivalry with China in terms of a longer-term contest between [democracies and autocracies](#) in which the latter cannot be allowed to prevail.

All of these have translated to real consequences in US policy on China. For one, the Biden administration has actively leveraged US alliances and partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region to shape China's operating environment, including inaugurating new mechanisms such as AUKUS and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). It has not only continued with the Trump era's economic and technological curbs on China, but also upped the ante by expanding the list of sanctioned Chinese companies/individuals and introducing [new restrictions](#) that aim to deny China access to the tools needed to produce advanced technology. At the time of writing, the United States is seeking to induct allies [Japan and the Netherlands](#) in its technological curbs on China.

“Reluctant Rival”

Beijing sees itself as being drawn into a [“reluctant rivalry”](#). It resists the “competition” narrative that Washington uses to characterise US-China relations, with Xi reportedly telling Biden that “the so-called [‘democracy versus authoritarianism’ narrative](#) is not the defining feature of today's world.” Beijing's perception is that China is being compelled to defend its legitimate rights and interests in the face of [“unreasonable \[American\] suppression”](#), and that while it does not seek confrontation, it is also “not afraid” of one. In this view, Beijing is “forced” to become Washington's rival. The

Chinese dilemma is that Washington has already determined that China's rise is antithetical to US interests.



The competition between the current great powers - US and China - is hardly mutual as China considers itself drawn into a "reluctant rivalry" with the US and has a different view of this "competition" narrative.

Image from Pixabay.

Beijing could try to moderate the more abrasive edges of its foreign policy, particularly towards the United States and the West, and there are tentative signals that it is re-thinking its approach, especially after Xi's call on Chinese officials to make the country more "[lovable](#)".

Yet a genuine shift in Chinese diplomacy is difficult, not least because years of "[wolf-warrior](#)" diplomacy have already led to a considerable degree of embedment of this mindset among China's external agencies. Beijing's continual support for Russia – even if it seems uncomfortable about the latter's invasion of Ukraine – will also not help its relations with the United States and the West.

At the same time, internal debate continues among Chinese elites on how best to handle relations with the United States. On the one hand, there are those who see the pragmatic need for a degree of accommodation to "[meet \[the Americans\] halfway](#)", in the hope that this could help reset relations or buy some strategic space. On the flipside, others decry offering any form of concession in the face of "[hegemonic bullying](#)", claiming that it will only embolden the United States and invite more pressure; therefore, only a tit-for-tat or strong response is appropriate to deter further American belligerence. A unifying narrative across these positions is that China has little choice but to double down on efforts to become more [self-reliant](#) in key economic and technological sectors.

Taiwan: Mother of all Core Interests

But among the issues confronting the two powers, the nerve point which has vexed Beijing the most is the increasing visibility of American support for Taiwan. Because the recovery of Taiwan is directly connected to the political legitimacy of the

Communist Party of China (CCP) and its constructed story of the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”, it is a “[core interest](#)” that brooks no compromise from China. Hence, Beijing will typically respond the hardest when it comes to interests relating to Taiwan. Yet Beijing’s increasingly hard-line approach towards the island – which it sees as necessary to deter “separatists” and “[foreign interventionists](#)” – is producing the opposite effect of fuelling greater American support for Taiwan. The reality for China is that it has few good options to effect change in American sentiments on Taiwan.

Beijing can also reach out to Taipei directly. But this is an effort complicated by its own move to suspend official communications with the Tsai Ing-wen administration in 2016. China’s current Taiwan strategy rests on making overtures to the more China-friendly opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT), while sidelining the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) – a plan that will only bear fruit if the KMT regains power in Taipei. It is an irony of history that the CCP’s historical rival is now its biggest ally in cross-strait relations.

The broader point here is that the state of cross-strait relations cannot be divorced from political outcomes in Taiwan. Given the potential risks of military conflict between China and the United States over Taiwan, it also means that the trajectory of the great power competition between the two is in part beholden to political developments in Taiwan.

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