

Re-thinking Coalitions: The United States in a World of Great Power Competition

By Timothy D. Hoyt

In 2018, the United States government released The National Security Strategy of the United States and its related National Defense Strategy.¹ Each document identified key changes in the national security environment, focusing on the emergence of “great power competition” with both Russia and China. President Biden’s interim national security guidance, issued in March 2021, is more circumspect. The guidance avoids the term “great power competition” but points out China’s increased assertiveness and its potential to mount a challenge to the current international system, as well as Russia’s continued interest in expanding global influence.² The US-China competition, in particular, is regularly compared to the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.³

The Cold War analogy should be used with great caution. It is relatively anomalous in the history of international relations – the result of a unique combination of catastrophic war, which destroyed most of the then great powers, and fundamentally incompatible ideological positions of the two remaining great powers. Similarly, efforts to compare the U.S.-China competition to other bipolar competitions should be made cautiously as well.⁴

“Great power competition,” in fact, is a normal state in international relations. It is, historically, a struggle for relative advantage and influence in the international system rather than a zero-sum game. Competition occurs in an environment with multiple great powers, even if two may appear dominant, as well as numerous other influential but less powerful states. These competitions sometimes lead to war between great powers – always far more expensive than either side anticipated, and often these conflicts are indecisive. But in both war and peacetime competition, the power that can gain broader international support and maintain a more effective coalition has much greater chances of success.

In terms of current coalition partners, the United States has a substantial edge over China. In addition to close bilateral alliances in Asia (Australia, Japan, South Korea), the United States has maintained friendly ties and economic relations with most states in the region. In addition, the United States security net has moderated the need for expensive defense expenditures, and the US-led global economy has contributed to significant economic growth throughout the region.

1 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America (December 2017)* accessed 8 June 2021 at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>. A summary of the the National Defense Strategy of the United States of America issued in 2018 can be found at <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf> (accessed 8 June 2021).

2 *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (March 2021)* accessed 8 June 2021 at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>

3 Thomas J. Christensen, “There Will Not Be A New Cold War: The limits of U.S.-Chinese competition”, *Foreign Affairs* (24 March 2021), accessed 8 June 2021 at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-03-24/there-will-not-be-new-cold-war>.

4 Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* (Houghton Mifflin, 2018).

Timothy D. Hoyt, the John Nicholas Brown Chair of Counterterrorism at the U.S. Naval War College, explains that “The US-China competition, in particular, is regularly compared to the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.” However, “...The Cold War analogy should be used with great caution. It is relatively anomalous in the history of international relations ...”

China, by contrast, has two acknowledged allies—North Korea and Pakistan. It does, however, have significant economic advantages, including proximity to the other Asian states, established supply chains, and very high levels of trade and investment (including the new Belt and Road Initiative). These can translate into diplomatic influence, particularly over smaller states, which may, in turn, affect the ability of regional and international organizations to resist Chinese aggression.

China's economic power will not disappear – it is a permanent feature of the international system, although how much more it will grow and how quickly are matters for conjecture. Therefore, the United States will have to deal with a very different type of competition than the Cold War. Key partners in Asia will have close economic relationships with China. These connections will affect both their calculation of national interests and their willingness and ability to act within the region and the international community. This reality, in turn, will require the United States to recalibrate its approach to coalitions and diplomacy because the United States will have to compete for support on issues where Chinese and American interests differ.

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Since the end of the Second World War, the United States has led coalitions from a position of dominance due to its disproportionate military and economic strength. Likewise, since the end of the Cold War, accusations of American “hyperpower,” the disagreements over the invasion of Iraq, and contentious relations with partners during the Trump administration all suggest that the United States can be an inconsistent, and indeed inconsiderate, partner. That approach needs to change.

In addition to China, other powers are rising. India and Japan, by most reasonable standards, have become great powers. So has Germany, although it is also enmeshed in both the European Union and NATO. In addition, many of the countries in the Indo-Pacific are defining themselves as middle powers. All these states have agency, and all have important economic and political links to China. They will want, and will deserve, a say in coalition approaches in the U.S.-China competition because each has important interests at stake. The United States has not led in a genuinely multipolar environment since 1943 – and that requires a very different leadership style.

In a multipolar great power competition, where economic and military supremacy can no longer be taken for granted, diplomacy will be a critical tool. Building and sustaining coalitions will require resources and attention – any “coalition of the willing” will have to be based on slow and sometimes painful diplomacy. The United States is not used to treating its partners as equals, but to sustain a generation-long competition with China, it will have to learn.

It is here, perhaps, that the Cold War may offer some unexpected and useful lessons. The 1960s and 1970s offer examples of the United States competing and sometimes cooperating with a superpower (*détente*), working with allies asserting their own interests (De Gaulle and Willy Brandt), and painstakingly building coalition support for re-armament programs in the face of continued Soviet aggression (theater nuclear deployments). Rediscovering diplomatic nuance, enlarging, and valuing the State Department, and treating our partners more as equals and less as subordinates will all be vital to building and maintaining a strong coalition. The emergence of China creates an opportunity for the United States again to become a leader and example to the international community, and a diplomatic revolution would be a good start.

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