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Review article

GREAT POWER STRATEGIC COMPETITION IN THE CONTEMPORARY SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

Abstract:

The difference in attitudes, interests and influences of the great powers contributed to greater uncertainty and fear for the future of nations and states. In the past decade, revisionist and autocratic countries such as Russia and China have sought to shift the focus from the West to the East and build a "post-Western world order" that will reshape the world against American values and interests. In this new period of transition, which resembles the time of the Cold War, the traditional security-military issues of the balance of power, the arms race, the struggle for territories and the strengthening of alliances are being emphasized again. A possible confrontation between the great powers, where the United States of America is still the leading power in the world, while the PRC is the second economic and military power, and Russia is one of the two most powerful nuclear powers, could threaten global and regional security and stability.

The sharpened geopolitical rivalry between the "big three" will increase tensions in their spheres of interest, that is, in the regions and countries that are located on the strategic lines of separation. The focus of attention is on Eastern Europe and the Indo-Pacific region, which are of great geostrategic importance for the great powers and their alliances. Due to the historical connection with these "exclusive zones of interest", there is a possibility that the previous "competitive coexistence" will escalate into an intense security rivalry.

Keywords: *Strategic competition, great powers, national interests, security rivalry.*

Introduction

The Russian-Ukrainian war served as a “wake-up call” for reforming and shaping the international order, fueling numerous debates on restructuring and redefining strategic approaches in security, defence and foreign policy documents. The most frequently used terms in the current strategic documents of Western countries and international organizations are the terms “competition”, “strategic competition”, “great powers competition” and “rivalry”. However, they are not clearly defined or explained what exactly they refer to. According to a group of authors, “competition in the international sphere is an attempt to gain advantage, often relative to others believed to pose a challenge or threat, through the self-interested pursuit of contested goods such as power, security, wealth, influence, and status” (Mazarr, et al., 2018: 5). The Britannica Dictionary defines competition as “the act or process of trying to get or win something (such as a prize or a higher level of success) that someone else is also trying to get or win, i.e., it is an act or process of competing” (The Britannica Dictionary, 2024). The US Joint Chiefs of Staff use the concept of “strategic competition”, which it says is “a persistent and long-term struggle between two or more adversaries seeking to pursue incompatible interests without necessarily engaging in armed conflict with each other” (Joint Concept for Competing, 2023). At the same time, it is emphasized that “strategic competition is an enduring condition that needs to be managed, not a problem that needs to be solved”. In fact, competition is a condition or situation that requires attention and commitment, not a policy or strategy. Competition does not mean hostility, nor does it inevitably lead to conflict, but it is in - between conflict and cooperation, that is, it contains the elements of both terms.

In addition to being represented in American strategic documents, this concept is also used in the NATO Strategic Concept and the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence of the EU. For some authors, the concepts of strategic competition and great powers competition are identical, i.e. refer to the competition between potentially hostile states – USA, China and Russia, as well as to the competition between the NATO, EU and G7 organizations on the one side and BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on the other.

In general, competition refers to states or a group of states (alliances) competing for narrower goals such as the security of their nations or for broader goals – global leadership, better status in relation to others, the ability to influence or to dictate the outcome of important issues in regions of importance to national interests. Hence, four broad levels or types of competition are identified, namely: (1) a constant degree of interstate competition to maximize power or influence; (2) more pointed rivalries between states claiming systemic leadership; (3) fully militarized rivalries between aggressive states willing to use force and (4) organized campaigns of actions to gain advantage, short of major war (Mazarr, 2022:3).

In international relations, states compete in several areas for different types of goods, to realize different ambitions and interests, while using various economic, security, military, diplomatic, information technology means in order to gain competitive advantage and dominance on the international scene (Cohen, et al., 2023:10). States mostly compete for security and power, because no state feels safe in a world of competing entities. In order to ensure their security they are encouraged to accumulate more power to avoid the influence of power from other states. This alludes to the traditional realist approach that refers to the security competition between states, and especially to the political-military sphere of competition, as well as the competition to acquire greater material power. However, when states become more powerful, their foreign policy capabilities grow (they become more attractive to work with other countries), international alliances expand and strengthen, and their ambitions become more aggressive.

Contemporary researchers of international relations believe that competition can easily escalate into potential conflict or inevitable war due to the fear of the United States (the current ruling power) from the growth of Chinese power (a new emerging power) (Allison, 2017). "Rising power syndrome" creates a sense of insecurity and fear in a ruling power that is ready and determined to defend the status quo, undertaking pre-emptive strikes or containment strategies to prevent future intentions and influence of a rising power (Herd, 2020).

Strategic competition through the prism of the national security policy of the great powers

A full understanding of strategic competition or rivalry between great powers requires consideration of their national strategies, interests, and goals to understand how they conceptualize rivalries. Hence, we will perceive and analyze the interests, goals and priorities of the "big three" (USA, PRC and Russia), where they collide, overlap or diverge. This will allow us to assess to what extent their rivalry will intensify and whether it would encourage new divisions and confrontations.

For more than seven decades the United States of America has been the leading country in the world, but in recent years its global leadership and vision of world order have been threatened by revisionist and authoritarian states such as the PRC and Russia, which are becoming increasingly assertive on the international stage and seek to erode American power, influence, and interests.

The United States security policy is aimed at achieving the main goal, which is "a free, open, prosperous and secure international order". According to the strategic determination of the United States, it will strive to protect its vital national interests, namely: to protect the security of the American people; expanding economic prosperity and opportunity, and realizing and defending the democratic values at the heart of the American way of life (National Security Strategy of the USA, 2022). To achieve the main goal, they will invest in

the basic sources and means of power and influence, in building the strongest possible coalition of nations, and in modernizing and strengthening the armed forces to be ready for the era of strategic competition with the great powers. The American strategic approach encompasses all elements of national power such as diplomacy, development cooperation, industry, economy, intelligence and defence with which to counter strategic competitors.

In general, US strategic pursuits are state-centrally focused on the PRC, followed by Russia. Even in the 2017 National Security Strategy of the United States, the revisionist powers PRC and Russia are highlighted as potential challengers that could threaten the security and interests of the United States. But with changes in the security environment, these countries have been given a different status in the National Security Strategy and the 2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States. The PRC is presented as a “pacing challenge”, and as the most consistent geopolitical and systemic challenge for the US. It is the only serious competitor of the United States, whose intention is to reshape the international order with the help of its growing economic, diplomatic, military and technological power. While Russia is presented as an “acute threat” to the vital interests of the United States, and an immediate threat to the free and open international system (National Defense Strategy of the USA, 2022). Such description creates more confusion whether these countries are mutual competitors, rivals, opponents or enemies.

In essence, the rivalry mostly refers to territorial or spatial factors, such as dominating or influencing regions important for the realization of national interests. For the US, two regions are considered priority and fundamental for Euro-Atlantic security, namely Europe (due to the threat from Russia) and the Indo-Pacific (due to the challenge from the People’s Republic of China). For both regions, they are creating a broad coalition of allies and partners that will act in a “united front” against the PRC and Russia. The most important strategic alliances of the USA are NATO, the EU and the G7, which are considered the cornerstones and defenders of the Western liberal democratic order.

With the Strategic Competition Act (of 2021), the US will effectively address the national and economic security challenges posed by the PRC. In doing so, the United States will seek to increase its strategic focus on the Indo-Pacific and prioritize alliances, partnerships, and American global leadership. Furthermore, they will counter China’s harmful political influence and its predatory economic practices, encouraging diplomatic and economic activity and promoting American values (The Strategic Competition Act, 2021). With this Act, the US is preparing for a global confrontation with China and a zero-sum competition between superpowers that is dangerous and counterproductive to the security and stability of certain regions and the world.

For the US, building alliances and partnerships is imperative for strategic competition with the PRC. In particular, the Indo-Pacific region¹ is vital to US security and prosperity and represents the “epicenter of geopolitics in the 21st century”. They advocate a “free and open Indo-Pacific”, which could pose a serious problem in relations with China. For those reasons, they strengthen regional security cooperation with Australia, India and Japan (known as the Quad), with Australia and the United Kingdom (AUKUS), with Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom (the Five Eyes Alliance), and with the ASEAN organization (Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States, 2022).

A central role in the rivalry with China and Russia will be played by the American armed forces, which have defined four defence priorities, namely: (1) Defending the homeland, keeping pace with the growing multi-domain threat posed by the PRC; (2) Deterring strategic attacks against the United States, allies, and partners; (3) Deterring aggression and being prepared to prevail in conflict when necessary - prioritizing the PRC challenge in the Indo-Pacific, then the Russian challenge in Europe, and (4) building a resilient Joint Force and defence ecosystem (National Defense Strategy of the USA, 2022).

The security policy of the PRC aims to achieve the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” by 2049 and realize the “Chinese dream” of an economically prosperous, powerful and modern socialist country. It will try to maintain the ideological direction (Marxism-Leninism) and the authoritarian centralized political system under the leadership of the Communist Party. By promoting “socialism with Chinese characteristics” it will strive to be the leader of the new era and take the place of the United States. The PRC will strive to protect its basic interests, such as: state sovereignty; national security; territorial integrity; national unification; the general stability of the political system, and ensuring sustainable economic and social development (NIDS China Security Report, 2019). In general, it advocates a holistic security approach, including all dimensions of security from political, economic, social, military, scientific-technological, environmental to cultural aspects, as well as all levels of security from individual to international level.

The People’s Republic of China applies the concept of governance “one country, two systems”, and advocates peaceful reunification with Taiwan. However, in the past decades, China has faced the problems surrounding the

¹More than half of the world’s population lives in this region, it accounts for 60% of global GDP, and 2/3 of the world’s economy, in which seven of the world’s largest armed forces are located. The United States has approximately 66 military bases and more than 375,000 military personnel deployed in the Indo-Pacific region (U.S. Defense Infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific, 2023). They have a budget of over \$4 billion to realize a “more free, open, secure, and connected Indo-Pacific” that will support and strengthen American alliances and partnerships (The White House. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/03/11/fact-sheet-the-presidents-budget-confronts-global-challenges-and-defends-democracy/>).

country's territorial integrity and maintaining control over Taiwan and Tibet, as well as sovereignty over a disputed group of islands in the South China Sea² (Annual Report to Congress, 2019). It strongly opposes the attempts of external foreign powers to interfere in the internal affairs of Hong Kong and Macao, and is especially against the anti-Chinese intentions for the independence of Taiwan. The Taiwan issue represents a strategic line of separation between the great powers, as it will further increase the intensity of the competition between China and the United States in the future. The region of East Asia is considered an exclusive zone of interest of the PRC, where the United States also has an interest and a huge influence.

In the strategic documents of the People's Republic of China, it is emphasized that "international strategic competition is on the rise". It refers primarily to the United States, which, by increasing defence expenditure, provoked and intensified the competition between the great powers, thereby disrupting global strategic stability. Among other things, it is pointed out that the United States has strengthened its Asia-Pacific military alliances (along with South Korea, Japan and Australia) and military presence, thus contributing to intensifying the arms race and disrupting regional security (China's National Defense in the New Era, 2019).

As global military competition intensifies, the PRC will also continue down the path of modernizing and strengthening its armed forces in the "Chinese way". It plans to transform the armed forces into a world-class force by the middle of the 21st century. Hence, China's national defence has the following objectives: deterring and resisting aggression; protection of political security, people's security and social stability; opposing and preventing Taiwan independence; suppression of supporters of separatist movements such as "Tibet independence" and the creation of "East Turkistan"; preservation of national sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and security; protection of China's maritime rights and interests; protection of security interests in space, electromagnetic and cyber space; protecting China's overseas interests and supporting the sustainable development of the country (Ibid.).

On the international level, as the second economic and military power in the world, the PRC promotes true multilateralism and international "win-win" cooperation, and is against all forms of hegemony, power politics, unilateralism, protectionism and neo-colonization. It is also against confrontation and military conflicts in international relations, and in particular, it is against the zero-sum game and the policy of creating blocs (Jinping, 2022). In general, China has no intention of challenging the United States, but it adheres to the

²Territorial claims in the South China Sea by several sovereign states will intensify the rivalry between the great powers and their alliances. For China, the South China Sea plays an important role in terms of the economic security of East Asia, because Northeast Asia relies on the flow of oil and trade through this sea, including more than 80% of crude oil for Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. It is also a vital artery for trade of several world economic powers.

position that “we will not attack unless we are attacked, but we will surely counterattack if attacked”. The country is committed to developing friendly cooperation and peaceful coexistence with all countries in the world. It participates in several international organizations, the most significant of which are BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, APEC and others. One of China’s most important strategic initiatives is the “Belt and Road” with which 147 countries have signed a cooperation agreement. While the comprehensive strategic partnership with Russia poses a major challenge to the future of the Western liberal order.

Russian security policy is aimed at strengthening the defence capability, internal unity and political stability of the country and the economy in order to effectively resist external pressures. Opposing relations between Russia and the United States due to the expansion of NATO, the deployment of the American anti-missile system in Europe and the Asia-Pacific region, the war in Ukraine, as well as misunderstandings about global problems, contributed to the development of geopolitical competition into open hostility between them. Although it does not belong to the group of developed countries and economically lags behind Western countries, however, Russia is characterized by “more than a thousand years of independence”, “a special position as a unique country-civilization” and represents “a huge Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power” and is “one of the two largest nuclear powers” (The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, 2023).

The Russian Federation will endeavor to protect its interests. According to the National Security Strategy, Russian national interests are the following: (1) saving the people of Russia, developing human potential, improving the quality of life and well-being of citizens; (2) protection of the constitutional order, sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and strengthening of the country’s defence; (3) maintaining civil peace and harmony, strengthening the rule of law, eradicating corruption, protecting citizens, developing mechanisms of interaction between the state and civil society; (4) development of a safe information space and protection from destructive informational and psychological impact; (5) sustainable development of the Russian economy on a new technological basis; (6) environmental protection and adaptation to climate change; (7) strengthening of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values, preservation of cultural and historical heritage, and (8) maintaining strategic stability, strengthening peace and security and legal foundations of international relations (Стратегия национальной безопасности Российской Федерации, 2021).

Russian strategists in the Military Doctrine of 2014 pointed to increased global competition, tensions in various areas of interstate and interregional interaction, and potential rivalries at the regional and global level in international relations (Военная доктрина Российской Федерации, 2014). In the past decade, Russia advocated for the formation of new structures, rules and principles of the world order due to the inefficiency of international institu-

tions and the global security system. They believe that the increasing number of new regional and global centers of power, and the strengthening of their positions as regional and global leaders will lead to a change in the structure of the world order (Стратегия национальной безопасности Российской Федерации, 2021).

The 2023 Foreign Policy Concept states that Russia will play a significant role in shaping the modern system of international relations. That is, it will be one of the sovereign centers of global development whose historically unique mission is aimed at maintaining the global balance of power and building a multipolar international system. One of its foreign policy goals is to strengthen Russia's position as "one of the responsible, powerful and independent centres of the modern world". While, an important priority will be eliminating the dominance of the USA and other unfriendly states in global affairs, and creating conditions that will allow each state to give up neo-colonial or hegemonic ambitions (The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, 2023).

Although for Russian foreign and security policy Western countries (led by the USA and its satellites) and alliances (such as NATO) are a threat to national security, however, the Russian Federation is interested in maintaining strategic parity and peaceful coexistence with the USA and other Anglo-Saxon states and establishing a balance of interests between Russia and the United States. Considering their status as the most powerful nuclear powers and responsibility for strategic stability and international security. Like other world powers, "hard" (military) power is the main means of realizing Russia's foreign and security policy and for realizing its geopolitical goals in strategically important regions. Because of the historical connection, Russia has ambitions in Eastern Europe (in the former Soviet republics), which is considered their strategic sphere of influence. On the other hand, the expansion of NATO with new member countries (Finland and Sweden) and the increase of allied military forces on the Eastern flank of the Alliance (on the border with Russia), further increased the security-military rivalry between the great powers.

The Russian Federation seeks to strengthen relations and partnerships with developing countries (known as the Global South), including the countries of the "Islamic World" (such as Iran, Syria, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt), and the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean (Brazil, Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela). Of particular importance are the deepened strategic partnerships with the People's Republic of China, Belarus and India, and the international organizations of which it is a member, such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and RIC (Russia, India and China) (Ibid.).

Key factors and indicators for measuring strategic competition

The discourse of strategic competition was mainly based on debates that provided limited explanations and definitions of the term, but complexity arises when competition or rivalry has to be reduced to empirical indicators. Although there is no precise formula for measuring “competitive success”, one of them is “the country’s internal stability, building strong regional and global alliances and partnerships, and interconnectedness.” For a more objective and precise measurement of the strategic competition between the superpowers, we will elaborate the essential categories and determinants of competitiveness. Authors Michael Mazzar, Brian Frederick, and Yvonne Crane analyze strategic competition through the following four general categories and factors:

1. *Overall context for competition.* Five dominant trends shaping the strategic environment for competition have been identified, namely: the multipolar world system, challenges to the neoliberal model, the fourth industrial revolution, the rise of vulnerable infospheres, and climate change and crises. These trends are measured using numerous geopolitical, social, economic, military and environmental indicators;

2. *National power and competitiveness.* Key factors for the analysis of national power and competitiveness are: the total productive capacity of the country, the ability to build advanced technologies, fiscal agility, the effectiveness of governance, military resources and capabilities;

3. *International position and influence.* It is a category of strategic competition that is determined by the following factors: economic position and engagement, alignment with key allies and partners, ideological and paradigmatic influence, military engagement and posture;

4. *Mapping the bilateral competition.* It refers to the specific conflicts of interests and objectives that define the nature of bilateral competitiveness. In that context, the basic national interests of competitors are taken into account, and the most important areas where interests clash or intersect are identified (Mazarr, Frederick and Crane, 2022).

From the above, we can conclude that competition or rivalry has many forms, but also numerous dilemmas about whether it refers to systemic or ideological competition, reputation and prestige, dominance in world politics or regional hegemony, acquisition of economic, military or technological power? It implies the need for a more detailed elaboration of several renowned indexes that will serve as indicators for measuring the rating of the great powers.

Table 1: Comparison of key political, economic, security, and military indicators of the United States, the PR China, and the Russian Federation for 2023.

Indicators (ranking)	USA	PR China	Russian Federation
Democracy Index	Flawed democracy	Authoritarian regime	Authoritarian regime
Global Power Index	1	2	11
Global Peace Index	131	80	158
Globalization index	25	79	55
Gross domestic product	1	2	11
Technological progress	2	38	44
Military Power (Nuclear Power)	1 (2)	2 (3)	3 (1)
Key institutions, security and economic alliances	NATO, G7, G20, UNSC, APEC, Quad, AUKUS	BRICS, SCO, UNSC, G20, APEC	BRICS, SCO, UNSC, G20, APEC, EAEU, CIS, CSTO
Sphere of influence	Europe, Indo-Pacific	East Asia	Eastern Europe
Common areas of competition	International rules and norms, political and economic influence in key countries and regions, dominance and leadership in international organizations and institutions		

*Source: Economist Intelligence Unit, Pareto Economics, Institute for Economics & Peace, KOF Swiss Economic Institute, IMF, Global Finance, SIPRI.

As shown in the table, the rivalry between the USA, China and Russia refers to the geopolitical, economic, security-military and technological spheres of competition. In general, the focus of competitors is on the struggle for strategic supremacy and shaping the international order according to their national characteristics. Compared to Russia, the US has a better competitive position for global influence, a stronger economy, more powerful alliances and allies, and is a global technology leader. There is also a huge disparity in military power between the world's three most powerful militaries. US military spending in 2023 amounted to \$916 billion, which is three times more than the allocations of the second-ranked military power China (\$296 billion), and more than eight times exceeds the military spending of the third world power Russia, which amounted to \$109 billion (Tian, et al., 2024). One of Russia's advantages in the

military sphere of competition is that it has a larger nuclear arsenal than the United States and China.

The ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine has fueled trade wars and an arms race in Europe and East Asia that are considered strategic spheres of influence for the great powers. For example, defence spendings in Europe in 2023 was \$588 billion (which is 62% more than in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea), while military expenditure in East Asia grew by 6.2% to \$411 billion dollars (Ibid.).

From an economic perspective, the Russian economy lags behind and cannot compete with the United States and China, which are considered economic superpowers. The paradox is that, despite a wide range of international economic sanctions, the Russian economy in 2023 surpassed both the United States and Europe (in terms of economic growth), increasing by 3.6% as a result of increased defence spending (Garver, 2024). The strategic partnership with China, as well as with other BRICS countries, will enable Russia to be more competitive and strengthen its economic position at the international level.

Based on the empirical results, we believe that the strategic competition will take place in several (military and non-military) spheres between the dominant superpowers USA and PR China. According to some authors, the competition between the two powers will take place in a so-called “three-dimensional game” with a different distribution of power at the military level, at the economic level, and at the transnational level of interdependence that includes non-military spheres (such as climate change, global pandemics and space technology which require more cooperation than rivalry). Most likely, cooperation and competition will occur simultaneously, and will resemble “cooperative rivalry” (Nye, 2022). But if the two most powerful states in the world fail to coexist, there is a possibility that strategic competition will turn into a strategic confrontation. Certain events, such as strained trade relations between them, the origin of the coronavirus pandemic, accusations of Chinese technology companies of espionage, support for Taiwan’s independence, and US plans to build an anti-missile system in the Indo-Pacific region, have contributed to increasing tensions between the superpowers.

For now, the United States is the leading global power that will seek to promote Western values and leadership in international organizations and institutions. However, the rise of the PRC as the second economic and military power in the world will reduce the dominance and role of the United States in international relations. Due to the different systemic and ideological values (such as “socialism with Chinese characteristics”) promoted by China, the rivalry between the two powers is expected to intensify, which would lead to a number of security and economic implications of an international nature.

Conclusion

On the international stage, the great powers compete in several spheres for different types of goods, to realize different ambitions and interests, while using various economic, security, military, diplomatic, information technology means in order to gain a competitive advantage. Each of the “big three” competitors seeks to promote its own values and realize national interests and goals, which will inevitably lead to conflict in those zones or spheres where their interests collide or overlap. Because of the historical connection, Russia has ambitions in Eastern Europe, and China seeks to turn East Asia into its exclusive zone of interest, while the United States has enormous influence in both regions where it creates a broad coalition of allies and partners. If the strategic competitors fail to stabilize their intense security-military rivalry, it is more likely that the world will fragment into several security and economic blocs and disrupt global security and stability.

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