Same Great Power Competition, New Reactions

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20 October 2021

Abstract

The United States faces a complex and rapidly advancing international climate in which it may no longer be the most powerful contender in the great power competition. Nations like China and Russia seek to displace democratic governments in favor of their own authoritarian regimes, and they pose a real and growing threat. Although the United States has presented strategies to combat these adversarial actions, it has become readily apparent that the nation cannot expend the human capital or resources for full-out wars with both China and Russia. Instead, military leaders must focus their efforts on areas that the United States can balance the scales against such large, authoritarian nations. In order to best position itself against both, the United States must significantly improve on the technological fronts of artificial intelligences and cyber warfare. Both of these underutilized and underfunded technologies are known to be momentous force multipliers that offer the chance to compete with such militant, persistent enemies like China and Russia. Although the United States is well behind its great power competitors in the funding and research of these technologies, it is not too late to shift the focus away from the conventional warfare tactics that have been the focus for centuries in favor of more advanced and flexible forms of warfare.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, China, cyber warfare, great power competition, Russia

Same Great Power Competition, New Reactions

In both the National Defense Strategy and National Security Strategy, the United States (U.S.) recognizes the global security environment is changing, with nations such as China and Russia working to ensure their success through disinformation and deception (Biden, 2021; Mattis, 2018). In response to these threats, the U.S. has created a Global Campaign Plan (GCP) which define options that will be undertaken should military conflict arise (Mehta, 2018). The GCPs identify China and Russia as rivals that present challenges to international security and democracy (Trump, 2018). The U.S.' strategic position toward these hostile powers is evident in the statement: "competition does not always mean hostility, nor does it inevitably lead to conflict - although none should doubt our commitment to defend our interests," clarifying that the U.S. will fight to protect its assets and allies (Trump, 2018, p. 3). While the position is clear, the U.S. faces a problem defining how to best position itself against the threats China and Russia pose. Research indicates the best way to handle these aggressions is a shift away from conventional, human-powered war efforts, and instead toward the use of cyber capabilities and autonomous forces that can survive contested battlespaces (Jensen et al., 2020; Smagh, 2020; Smeets, 2018).

Great Power Competition Defined

The great power competition is defined as the modern-day strategic competition between China, Russia, and the U.S. where all three are asserting their ability to shape economic, military, and ideological norms (Ashford, 2021). "Great power competition" is not a new concept, with its identification as one of the root causes of World War I and a contributor for World War II. It is currently one of the most concerning threats to national security (Dismukes, 2020). Former Secretary of Defense, General James Mattis (ret), recognized the U.S. is resurfacing from a low point in military strategy and entering into complex security environment where China and

Russia have emerged as key players (Mattis, 2018). With the U.S.'s lapse in strategy and the stiff opposition these nations pose, experts warn that competing for the sake of competition could be a dangerous mistake (Ashford, 2021). Further muddying this is the fact that the U.S. considers these two very different nations as similarly influential in the great power competition, making it difficult to prioritize which poses the most danger and deserves more focus (Cooper, 2020).

China

Political relations between the U.S. and China originated in 1979, with hopes that diplomatic engagement would encourage China to join the democratic world stage (Trump, 2020). Instead, China has presented itself as a fierce, growing competitor utilizing both economic practices and militarization to gain strategic footholds (Mattis, 2018). The Chinese government is known for its long-term strategic plans, often projecting one hundred years into its future (Cheng, 2021). China's guiding ideology is "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," with three main tactical goals: superior military capabilities, involvement in foreign policy, and economic domination (USDOD, 2020). In reference to military might, China has called upon its army to become the world's strongest, surpassing that of the U.S.'s (Kania, 2019). Through this strength, China aims to protect its interests and resist aggression from enemies (Voskressenski, 2020). Aditionally, China has also sought to become a prominent name in foreign policy. Since 2012, Chinese the government has voiced its interest in diplomatic affairs with the intent of spreading Chinese characteristics (Poh & Li, 2017). Finally, China seeks to continue its upward economic growth. Over the past three decades, it has been able to maintain an unheard of 10% increase in GDP, causing it to be the fastest expanding economy in history (The World Bank, 2017). While hugely successful, China's economic practices and failure to adhere to international policies have raised concerns of free and open trade occurring (Oxford Economics, 2021).

What China Fears

Aligning with its goals, China's fears are represented by their dread of economic failure and separatism. With such a large economy reliant upon exports to the U.S. and other developed nations, China fears exclusion from international economic involvement (Lake, 2018). The U.S. has taken an increasingly protectionist posture against China and its economic power, with the previous presidency imposing billions of dollars' worth of tariffs on Chinese imports (Landler & Tankersley, 2018). These tariffs represent a large weight on China's economy, which could slow down the nation's economic expansion and ultimately make their goals unachievable (Tankersley & Bradsher, 2018). In addition to economic sanctions many local populations in the Western region of China, such as Tibet and Xinjiang, express a desire for freedom from Beijing's autocratic regime, identifying China's vulnerability to the possibility of separatism. To fight this sentiment, the Chinese government has implemented internment and reeducation camps and extreme surveillance measures (Ball, 2020). With such aggressive and dehumanizing measures being taken, China has highlighted their fear of losing control as significant.

Russia

At the conclusion of the Cold War, Russia appeared to be weak, but Russia's true capabilities are notoriously difficult to assess (Kuhrt & Feklyunina, 2017). Because of this paradox and difficulty understanding Russia's intent, the U.S. has attempted to maintain a relationship with Russia. Unfortunately, the nation's aggressive actions in pursuit of its strategic goals have increased strain and complications in maintaining the relationship (USDOS, 2021; USDOS, 2019). Of Russia's strategic goals, three have become more significant over the last decade: global recognition as a great power, limiting the U.S.' power, and protection of Russian identity (Lamoreaux, 2019). First, Russia recognizes it must restore itself to former power or

greater to extend global influence, however it remains far behind militarily, ideologically, and economically (Kuhrt & Feklyunina, 2017). Second, Russia recognizes that it must limit the U.S.' global power to advance its own. The Kremlin views U.S. democracy as an unstable form of government that degrades nations rather than stabilizes them (Taylor, 2018). Finally, Russia holds a millennium's old belief that it is divinely empowered to control and protect the "Rus", or Slavic ethnicities comprised of the Russian, Belarusian, Ukrainian, and others in the region (Suslov, 2015). Under the Russian Orthodox Church, the nation claims rights to these Slavic individuals, regardless of the fact that many do not live within Russian borders (Kelly, 2018).

What Russia Fears

Similar to China, Russia's fears stem from the failure to achieve their strategic goals. One of Russia's biggest fears is that democratic nations will undermine their authoritarian regime and replace it with their own. More specifically, the Russian government fears actions similar to that of the "Trojan horse" where the U.S. government will institute a regime change utilizing the Russia people (Breshidsky, 2019). This action would serve to disable the Russian government from achieving any of its three strategic goals. For example, one recent topic of conversation is the Russian struggle against the Belarusian reclamation of their own language, culture, and history, as that would go directly against the Kremlin's desire to reunify all "Rus" people (Whitmore, 2021). Russia has highlighted this fear through the creation of a 2019-2025 plan of action that includes neutralizing threats from the West and other anti-Russian players that may seek to interrupt their regime expansion (Suciu, 2020).

United States' Position

With the tensions of competition increasing, the U.S. must identify how it can best position itself against conflict with both China and Russia (Mattis, 2018). While both nations

have been identified as threats, military leaders have recognized the U.S. may not be able to afford the resources to prepare for two different, though overlapping, conflicts (Mehta, 2018). One concern is the large difference in what a full scale conflict with either nation would require. China, for instance, would require a significant maritime fight with high use of air and naval forces, whereas Russia's substantial land mass and strategically placed air defense systems would require a greater utilization of ground forces (Cooper, 2020). Scholars debate whether it is worth the U.S.' time or resources to attempt a struggle for power with these nations, or to attempt to coexist (Ashford, 2021). Much of this concern stems fron the fact that the U.S. will likely suffer catastrophically high fatalities in full scale war win, with a loss and even higher death-tolls being possible due to the huge forces both Russia and China could assemble (Smagh, 2020). While the U.S. may struggle to contend with the huge populations or military might of China and Russia, it can best position itself for success through advances and integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and cyber capabilities in its strategy (Jensen et al., 2020; Smeets, 2018).

Artificial Intelligence Integration

Physicist Steven Hawking posited AI would be one of the greatest creations in human history, but if not properly managed, likely also the last (Hawking et al., 2014). U.S. military leaders recognize both the dangers of being surpassed by adversarial AI capabilities and the promise of AI in closing the gap between the U.S. and other military forces, with its development noted as key in the National Defense Strategy (Jensen et al., 2020; Mattis, 2018). Unfortunately, Russia and China recognize the importance of AI in future warfare as well, making it an even higher priority for the U.S. if it hopes to remain competitive. Russian President Putin stated "whoever becomes the leader in this sphere [AI] will become the ruler of the world," emphasizing the high value the nation places on advanced technology in warfare

(Vincent, 2017, p.1). China's leadership has publicly endorsed AI's value in warfare via AI development plans and governmental funding thought to be in the tens of billions of dollars range (Allen, 2019; Webster et al., 2017). In response to these obvious threats, the U.S. has increased its AI funding by $2 billion between 2016 and 2021 and significantly increased its AI research, but this is still woefully short of the actions of the nation's adversaries (Hoadley & Sayler, 2020; Layton, 2021). One key area in AI that the U.S. must consider is the development of Intelligent Virtual Assistants (IVA) for optimized decision-making in combat operations. This future decision support system is a technology that would be supplied with a database of hundreds of wargaming exercises that could be utilized to provide real-time combat answers that would take a human a huge amount of time to calculate, within seconds (Hallaq et al., 2017). Through funding and fielding these advanced technologies, the U.S. should be able to best posture itself against future AI warfare threats from China and Russia.

Cyber Warfare Integration

Cyber warfare is an increasingly hot topic in the military sphere, as it is known to be an independent asset capable of inflicting damage while avoiding the mass casualties experienced in conventional war, as well as providing significant force multiplying abilities for conventional war techniques (Smeets, 2018). Likened to early nuclear technological developments, cyber weapons have numerous tactical applications but tend to be poorly understood and underutilized (Cirenza, 2016; Hayden, 2016). Though it may not yet be fully utilized in all realms of warfare, China has been executing cyber-attacks again the U.S. and others regularly in the form of intellectual property theft. With its desire to achieve global supremacy so profoundly dependent on economic and technological success, China views intellectual property theft as a legitimate form of espionage and has resultantly initiated immense hacking efforts (Demchak, 2019; The

Washington Post Editorial Board, 2018). On different side of the cyber warfare front, Russia has been using advances in cyber technology to wage an all-out disinformation war in America. This onslaught takes advantage of computing systems, the internet, and social media sources to bombard the U.S. with high volumes of repetitive sources of disinformation created to divide and destroy democracy (Kilkenny, 2021). While these tactics may not seem as threatening as the destruction wrought by conventional war, the cyber warfare field presents a dangerous and flexible form of strategy that the U.S. may not be prepared to handle. To best manage this new realm of warfare, U.S. cyber capabilities need to be developed from a reactionary force into a unified, persistent force under its own command (Nakasone, 2019). While it has yet to come to fruition, it has been recommended that a standalone "cyber force" similar to the U.S. Space Force should be created (Solce, 2008). This course of action for the U.S. would place the appropriate amount of emphasis on the ever-increasing importance of military cyber capabilities.

Conclusion

Whether U.S. focuses its strategic planning toward China, Russia, or both concurrently, it must recognize that the previous war tactics must be adapted or failure is inevitable. Thus, to best position itself to achieve its GCPs, the U.S. must shift its strategic focus away from conventional human-powered war efforts, toward a more autonomous force that is able to survive the highly contested battlespaces via AI integration and cyber capabilities (Smagh, 2020; Smeets, 2018). As it stands, the nation is not ready to compete in these regards. Two decades of emphasis on counter terrorism has biased our military strategy toward operations in permissive environments where air superiority comes with ease (Berrier et al., 2019; USAF, 2018). However, if the U.S. continues to bolster its AI and cyber warfare budgets and develop, field, and train to the use of these technologies, it can best position itself for future conflicts with either China or Russia.

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