



Great Power Relations: What Makes Powers Great and Why Do They Compete?

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Abstract

What does great power competition mean and why might it be happening? This paper deconstructs those questions to take a deeper look at what makes powers great and how various explanatory frameworks within international relations scholarship predict great power interaction under different conditions. The intention here is to pull the critical assumptions built into policy documents and senior leader statements to the forefront, facilitating dialogue on a rapid and dynamic shift in US national security focus. In other words, this paper is designed to explore the most critical features of emerging strategic documents, the “what” and the “why” of great power competition.

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Executive Summary

This paper explains the “what” and the “why” of great power competition (GPC) and some of the complex questions inherent in strategies based on the GPC construct. What makes powers great? What would drive those powers to compete? Are there other ways to describe how great powers interact, other than through competition? To answer these questions, this paper explores GPC through the lens of the international relations (IR) frameworks that underpin our understanding of national security. Our objective is to provide policymakers with a richer strategic context surrounding GPC and offer more tools to shape US strategy.

The questions raised by an exploration of GPC, and their relationship to the ways that policymakers interpret global events, are important to consider for several reasons. In the absence of stable definitions for what constitutes a great power, it is difficult to make judgements about the status of the evolving international system. Without a clear outline of that structure, it is difficult to identify the relevant analytic frameworks and historical analogues that can help us better explain events and forecast future challenges. In short, explicitly connecting the topic of great power competition to longstanding IR analytic tools can help us better understand the era we are entering and its implications for strategy.

What does GPC mean and why does it occur?

Great power competition is one component of the broader dynamic of great power relations, the ways in which economically and militarily significant countries interact. These interactions, which include both competition and cooperation, manifest differently according to the structure of the international system (i.e., the number of great powers) as well as how analysts understand the fundamental principles of global politics. Thus, understanding who the great powers are and why they interact as they do is a central strategic challenge. Our analysis informs several related findings based on this study:

- Descriptions of GPC in policy documents like the National Security Strategy, unclassified National Defense Strategy, and other Joint and service strategies, often pull from different understandings of global dynamics (i.e., from multiple IR schools of thought)—from an emphasis on the importance of democracies and institutions, to myriad strains of analysis predicated on forms of power politics. Even within the context of power politics, various traditions play out across US strategies, including

related but intellectually distinct discussions of power transitions (the rise and fall of hegemons) and the challenges of a multipolar world.

- Our analysis finds that US strategies are variable with respect to a consistent internal narrative. This complicates the ability for policymakers and policy documents to remain internally coherent with respect to perspective, and transparent about the worldviews on which they are operating. We also identified areas of vulnerability where GPC as an organizing principle may narrow policymakers' assessment of global events. These vulnerabilities center on the role of cooperation in great power dynamics. Most IR frameworks encourage, in at least some contexts, the value of identifying points of cooperation with other great powers. US strategies often frame great power adversaries exclusively in terms of competition, which may obfuscate opportunities for cooperation that are in the US interest.
- Relatedly, GPC's focus on China and Russia does not address the potential for other states to be, or to become, great powers, which may emerge—or be cultivated through US policy to serve—as potential sources of cooperation or balancing. Finally, by associating “competition” with great power adversaries and “cooperation” with allies and partners, strategies risk obscuring the reality that allies can and do compete with one another, just as adversaries can cooperate.

Enhancing strategic clarity

Our findings yield recommendations for those involved in crafting or executing GPC policy:

1. Instead of regarding GPC as a catchall rubric, **consider the current era as one of great power relations**. By making competition a ubiquitous descriptor, we risk ignoring other important aspects of great power relations that account for opportunities for cooperation with adversaries when it is in the US interest, and competition with other great powers if needed.
2. The Department of Defense often uses spectrums to describe GPC, but such a depiction invites several important questions: What factors inform a GPC continuum? What constitutes the underlying variable that makes a continuum coherent? Can the US be at several points on a continuum at the same time with the same state? **Clarifying the strategic implications of conflict continuums** will help transition a popular and salient concept into a strategically valuable means of construing great power relations.
3. This paper provides tools to articulate how policymakers' theories of international politics influence their policies. Strategies that elaborate their worldviews transparently—**making assumptions explicit**—encourage more constructive

debates that engage underlying beliefs about global dynamics, promoting more cogent iteration of strategy.

4. Regardless of the particular theories one uses to make sense of national challenges, it is important to **identify the indicators and warnings** that signal whether our prevailing concepts best reflect reality. In other words, if the world and your expectations of it do not align, it is not the world that is wrong; it is your theory of it that is wrong.

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Introduction

The US national security community is in the midst of a renewed examination of great power competition (GPC) and its role in strategy. GPC already predominates as a strategic term inside the Department of Defense (DOD) and it has rapidly spread in the national dialogue on foreign policy. Yet there remains notable ambiguity regarding what GPC actually implies. What does the concept mean? Why is it happening now? How can we answer these questions authoritatively?¹ This paper aims to produce a more engaged debate on the subject of great power competition by considering what it means to be—and to compete as—a great power.²

Most observers of international affairs make sense of the complexities of global politics with the help of theories that simplify the world and make it comprehensible. These theories are not just abstract concepts; they serve as frameworks that represent what factors analysts believe are most significant in describing how the world works. Consequently, they offer a valuable lens for us to think about GPC and assess its application to national strategy. Our objective in this paper is to elaborate on relevant parts of international relations (IR) theories on the structure of global power and thus inform leaders on how to understand great power relations and then develop and advance appropriate, effective, and coherent policies.

Readers will benefit from an exploration of GPC and its relationship to the ways that policymakers interpret global events for four main reasons:

- **Definitions are not clear:** A stable, predictable understanding of what makes a power great is important for determining which state actors qualify, or may soon qualify, as great powers. The benefit of history means that analysts often agree on the roster of past great powers. Current assessments and predictions, however, cannot rely on that advantage. How do we know which powers are great powers, or may become great powers in the years to come? How would that knowledge influence security policy?
- **International relations scholarship typically focuses on great powers:** Many of the predominant theories on international relations seek to explain the behavior of the *leading* states in a system, not every state. Thus it is essential to understand which

¹ Definitional gaps are exacerbated by the diverse terms used to describe both the concept of and the other states involved in competition, including “interstate strategic competition,” “long-term strategic competition,” “adversaries,” “near-peer competitors,” and “global or regional peers.”

² As Nick Bisley notes, “there is little sustained reflection on what it means to be a great power in the current order.” See his *Great Powers in the Changing International Order* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2012).

are the great powers in order to know how policymakers' frameworks may or may not adequately explain the behaviors of a given state.

- **Learning from history relies on understanding shifts in the structure of international politics:** How do we ensure that we draw the right lessons from the past? Assessing the qualities of the current global system and its great powers better informs us as to which historical analogies are most appropriate, in part because “great powers face different incentives for cooperation and competition when more than two great powers are present.”³ Determining those qualities thus informs us about which historical analogies are appropriate and which are misleading. Is the unipolar post–Cold War period still operative? Are we returning to a version of the bipolar Cold War? Is the multipolar “long 19th century” a more apt analogy?
- **We often hold theories implicitly:** Any distilled description of the world, such as that contained in national strategy, relies on theories of state competition in order to make effective and coherent policy; yet these theories are often unstated. Taking the theories from implicit to explicit can encourage debate as to whether their assumptions remain valid or the best fit for how policymakers understand global political dynamics today.⁴

Organization

This paper explores GPC and its associated implications for strategy in two parts. We begin by analyzing the question of what makes for great power and describing the various ways that analysts and scholars have developed to determine which states qualify as great. Using this as a foundation, we then consider how many great powers actually populate the international system today and the implications of that power structure for world politics.

In the second section, we connect this assessment of the global system to current US strategies. We examine DOD guidance on GPC and explore how guidance can be understood through the analytic lenses provided by IR theories. The paper concludes with findings and a set of recommendations for policymakers based on this discussion. We also include suggestions for further reading in an appendix for those interested in exploring the topics and theories we survey here in detail.

³ Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

⁴ “Theory and International Institutions: Robert O. Keohane,” *Conversations with History*, March 8, 2004, https://conversations.berkeley.edu/keohane_2004.

What Is a Great Power?

Readers are likely most familiar with great power comparisons drawn from Europe from the 1600s on and with a particular focus on World War II and the Cold War. Earlier eras reflected a world of more than two great powers, in which alliance dynamics played an important role in constraining and facilitating conflict between various great powers; in these eras, ideology generally played a limited role in great power politics. The Cold War, on the other hand, featured just two great powers, with nuclear deterrence and ideology informing their relations. Thus understanding which are the great powers, what constitutes them as great, and how many exist is a prerequisite for identifying the most relevant periods and lessons from history.

The US government, including DOD, does not have an authoritative definition of what makes a power great. That does not mean it has ignored the concept. The 1995, 2002, and 2006 National Security Strategies (NSS) all reference US relations with great or major powers, implicitly suggesting that multiple great powers existed even in an era of US unipolarity. The 2002 and 2005 NSS best exemplify this characterization, asserting that all great powers stand on America's side in the war on terror and that the US will continue building good relations with the other great powers.⁵ However, these official documents never articulated a clear definition of what constitutes a great power. For example, the 1995 NSS associates great power status with having a leading role in international affairs, but elsewhere identifies states (usually China, Russia, and India) as rising or realized great/major powers without further elaboration.⁶

Recent documents implicitly and exclusively associate GPC with Russia and China more narrowly. Despite a growing consensus that these two countries are great powers, the precise rationale for that case is less coherent. Former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Paul Selva has described China and Russia as “accumulating wealth” and asserting themselves militarily.⁷ This invokes a concept of great power status dependent on a state's power and capabilities. Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford, however, has

⁵ George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, September 2002), 1-2; George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, March 2006), 36, 44.

⁶ William J. Clinton, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement 1995–1996* (Washington, DC: The White House, September 1995), 5, 31.

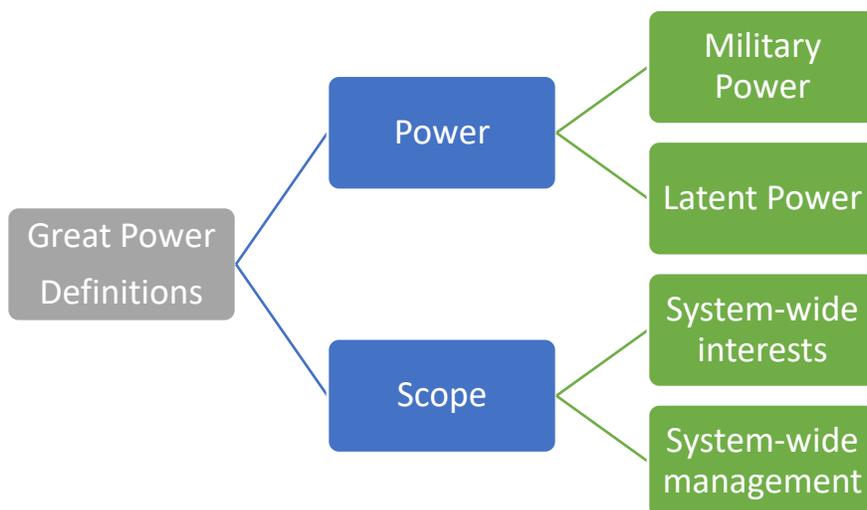
⁷ Jim Garamone, “Selva Describes Reality of Great Power Competition,” *DOD News*, January 30, 2018, <https://www.jcs.mil/Media/News/News-Display/Article/1428817/selva-describes-reality-of-great-power-competition/>.

described Russia and China as great power competitors on account of their attempt “to overturn the current rules-based international order” and “to assert greater influence on the world stage.”⁸ This points to two separate, though not incompatible, ideas of what makes for a great power—that it should have both a “managerial” status in interstate relations as well as system-wide interests. The following section explores the roots of these various definitions and how they change our understanding of great power status.

The debate over defining great powers

As seen in the distinction between General Selva’s and General Dunford’s statements, we can define great powers according to two categories: power and scope (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Two categories of great power definition



Source: CNA.

The power of great powers

Those definitions centered on power assess great power status according to either military power or “latent” power. Military power definitions can range from raw military expenditure or soldiers under arms, to sophisticated assessments of capabilities, to the possession of

⁸ Jim Garamone, “Dunford Describes US Great Power Competition with Russia, China,” US Department of Defense, March 21, 2019, <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1791811/dunford-describes-us-great-power-competition-with-russia-china/>.

particular—usually nuclear—weapons. Latent power definitions refer to national economic and demographic qualities that could, in time, be converted into military power.

Definitions based on military power can be judged according to either relative or definite benchmarks. That is, power can be dependent on the state's might relative to other states, or predicated on a state's possession of some capability, regardless of what others possess. For example, a relative metric might be the ability of a power to stand reasonably against most other great powers in a conflict. A definite (i.e., absolute) metric might be the possession of power projection capabilities (an aircraft carrier) or technology (nuclear weapons).⁹

Latent power definitions generally hold that economic and demographic factors underpin military power on a great power scale. This approach yields some expected outcomes, such as assessing China as a great power today, as well as some less anticipated results, such as Germany's potential inclusion—both powers have large, competitive economies.¹⁰ Over the coming century, this definition may include an even more diverse cast of states as great powers, including not only the US and China, but also India, Russia, Japan, Britain, Germany, and France, owing to their significant economic endowments.¹¹ One notable exception to this emphasis on economic power as the basis for military power was a tendency in the 1990s to describe Germany and Japan as “civilian great powers”—having great-power economies but limited militaries.¹² As Japan explores political reforms to expand its military, it becomes easy to see how quickly significant latent power can transform into concerns over military power.

The two most prominent definitions of great powers incorporate both economic and military power. Kenneth Waltz, the father of structural realism, has offered several definitions of a great power that blend military and latent power. His standard and widely cited definition argues that great powers are those that “score [highly] on... size of population and territory; resource endowment; military strength; political stability; and competence.”¹³ In a post-Cold War article on what he believed was the inevitable return of multipolarity, Waltz particularly emphasized

⁹ Jack Levy, *War in the Modern Great Power System, 1495-1975*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1983), 10-13 for an array of military-power-centric definitions; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 5.

¹⁰ James Forsyth and Thomas Griffith, “Through the Glass Darkly: The Unlikely Demise of Great-Power War,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (2007).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² David Blagden, “Global Multipolarity, European Security and Implications for UK Grand Strategy: Back to the Future, Once Again,” *International Affairs* 91, no. 2 (2015).

¹³ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

the role of a robust economy in great power dynamics. He argued that future competition between great powers would be primarily economic, since they had to have nuclear weapons in order to qualify as a great power—a qualification that incorporates a definite military power benchmark (nuclear weapons) with a focus on the world’s strongest economies.¹⁴ Perhaps the most commonly used dataset in IR scholarship, the Correlates of War (COW) project, defines a lesser category of “major powers” according to a survey of scholars on which powers they thought should be included. The COW then defines “great powers” as those states with more than 10 percent of the total national “capacity” of the “major powers.”¹⁵

The reach of great powers

Definitions based on scope assess great power status according to a state’s system-wide interests or system-wide management role.¹⁶ A great power with system-wide interests has vital equities that extend throughout the system. A country with a systemic management role grants great power status based on the nation’s central role in managing or setting rules for state behavior throughout the system. Both definitions assume that the great powers have significant military and/or economic endowments, which are necessary to exert influence.

The first scope-based definition in Figure 1 assigns great power status to states with significant system-wide interests. Definitions in this vein variously require a great power to exert an effect throughout the interstate system, be involved with other states around the world, have some stake in relations between all other states, and have a sizable influence on the shape of the international system.¹⁷ In other words, “great power status implies a responsibility and a right to intervene at a distance from border areas.”¹⁸

The system-manager camp defines great powers as states that, because of significant military capabilities, take (or are granted) a special status regarding international rules and norms. These states play a leading role in creating, enforcing, managing, and exempting themselves from international rules and rule-based order. For some, the fundamental feature of the

¹⁴ Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics,” *International Security* 18, no. 2 (1993).

¹⁵ Correlates of War Project, “State System Membership List, v2016,” 2017, accessed 07/15/2019, <http://correlatesofwar.org>.

¹⁶ Presently, the system is generally accepted as global. States whose interests are effectively limited to their region would thus be “regional” powers (e.g., Iran, North Korea).

¹⁷ Nick Bisley, *Great Powers in the Changing International Order* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2012); Bear Braumoeller, “Systemic Politics and the Origins of Great Power Conflict,” *American Political Science Review* 102, no. 1 (2008).

¹⁸ Lawrence Freedman, “The Counterrevolution in Strategic Affairs,” *Daedalus* 140, no. 3 (2011): 30.

modern international system is that the great powers “actively [work] to manage the system.”¹⁹ A more radical argument holds that great powers enjoy a form of “legalized hegemony,” in which they have a categorically different role with respect to most members of international society and enjoy special powers, be it spheres of influence or UN Security Council vetoes.²⁰ Great powers defined in this way necessarily inhabit a “distinctive and unequal” category of states and need not respect the formal equality and sovereignty of others.²¹ (This plays a significant role in Russia’s perception of what it means to be a great power.) While examples of such powers often focus on a great power’s role in generating and managing order, the converse—sustained success in challenging an international order’s rules—may also be grounds for great power status. China, Russia, and the United States—and, arguably, the European Union (EU)—all view themselves as managers or manipulators of the global system, with special rights and responsibilities.

Global interests or the capacity for system management also offer definitional mechanisms for distinguishing among great powers and others. For example, these definitions enable us to carve out different categories for great powers, major powers, and minor powers. The first have the ability to exert influence universally with global force-projection capabilities, the second lack such capabilities but can deter a great power (usually with nuclear weapons), and the third can neither project force globally nor deter a great power.²²

Who are the great powers?

Which states qualify as a great power will depend heavily on the benchmarks one adopts as important. As an example, Table 1 places states in different tiers according to the prevailing frameworks introduced above. Note that China may already be regarded as more prominent than the United States according to some frameworks (like the Correlates of War framework as seen in the first row).²³

¹⁹ Bisley, *Great Powers in the Changing International Order*, 9.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ This definition cuts closest to the term’s original reference to those European states given special roles, responsibilities, and rights in the 19th century’s Concert of Europe.

²² Nuno P. Monteiro, “Unrest Assured: Why Unipolarity Is not Peaceful,” *International Security* 36, no. 3 (2011).

²³ Using Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) statistics, China has a CINC of 0.21, while the US has a CINC of 0.13. Their respective share of “major power” CINC is 45 percent and 29 percent.

Table 1. Varying definitions of what makes a power great

Definition	Top-Tier Powers	Second-Tier Powers	Third-Tier Powers
Share of major power national capabilities	China, United States (great powers)	United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, Japan (major powers)	-
Significant power and global interests	United States, China, Russia, "Europe"	-	-
Hegemons and great powers	None (global hegemon)	United States (regional hegemon)	China, Japan, Russia, Germany, France, UK, India, Iran, Turkey (great powers)
Manager of international order	United States, European Union, perhaps China and Russia	-	-
Superpower and potential superpower	United States (superpower)	China (potential superpower)	Russia, Europe, Japan (great powers)
Global force projection abilities	United States (unipolar power)	China, Russia, France, UK, Israel, India, Pakistan, North Korea (major powers)	Non-nuclear states (minor states)

Source: CNA. "Share of major power national capabilities" is based on the Correlates of War index. "Significant power and global interests" and "Manager of international order" is based on a synthesis of literature exploring how and why the US, China, Russia and Europe see themselves or operate like great powers. "Hegemons and great powers" is drawn from Mearsheimer's *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. "Superpower" and "potential superpower" is drawn from Brooks and Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of Great Powers in the 21st Century." "Global force-projection abilities" is drawn from Montiero, "Unrest Assured."

DOD and other government definitions seem to mirror most closely the definition that distinguishes between superpowers and potential superpowers. US National Security Strategies from the unambiguously unipolar era (1990s to early 2000s) clearly acknowledged the existence of other great powers, but apparently reserved superpower status for the US. They also recognized that some great powers were outpacing others and thus merited additional attention.²⁴ The current emphasis on China's meteoric rise mirrors US strategies' placement of China between the United States and the other great powers it left behind. The global force-projection definition highlights being able to deploy military assets around the world as a key capability setting the US apart from all other major powers, but also identifies those states with nuclear deterrents that limit US options vis-à-vis that state.

²⁴ See, for example, Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States* (2002), 1-7, 27. It went so far as to warn explicitly that great power competition could resurge from Russia, China, and India.

Understanding Great Power Relations

Prussian strategist Carl von Clausewitz's oft-quoted aphorism reminds readers that war ought to be waged in the service of politics, but it says nothing about why and how wars begin. The question of why states compete and fight with one another preoccupies IR scholars and analysts. While no totalizing answer exists, IR scholars have identified several systematic ways of understanding interstate competition and the forces behind war.

One useful place to start is with IR theorist Robert Keohane's four-fold typology of interstate relations, which unfolds across harmony, cooperation, competition, and conflict.²⁵ Harmony represents the rare situation when two states' interests are perfectly aligned. Cooperation occurs when states are able to find some common interests that produce mutual benefit, despite clashing interests on other issues. An example would be the Grand Alliance of the Second World War where the Soviet Union, United States, and United Kingdom cooperated despite clashing interests over colonialism, Eastern Europe, and ideology. Competition occurs when states find that one's interests cannot be served without harming the interests of another. An example of this is US and Soviet jockeying for allies and clients during the Cold War. Stealing the adversary's client served one's own interests and directly harmed the other's interests. When violence is employed, competition turns to conflict. From this, it is clear that cooperation and competition can coexist, but that neither harmony nor conflict can coexist with any of the other typologies. Not only is this an influential framework among scholars, but it also corresponds to existing US government articulations of GPC.

What has DOD said about great power relations?

The 2017 NSS and the unclassified summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) have been heralded as refocusing on great power competition (although only the NSS uses the term, and only in one sentence).²⁶ The 2018 NDS summary notes that revisionist and rogue states

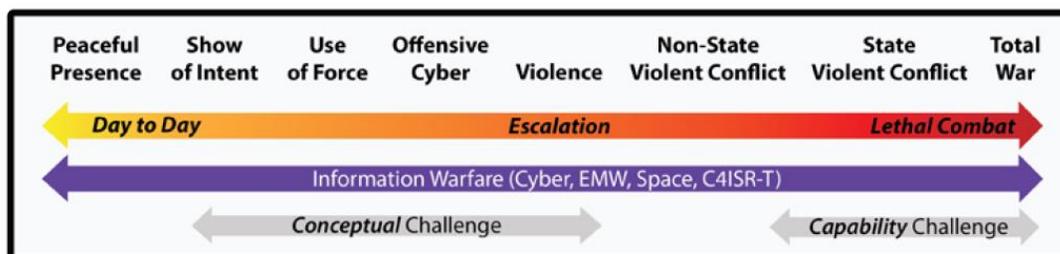
²⁵ Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

²⁶ Donald J. Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, December 2017), 27.

are now competing with the United States “across all dimensions of power.”²⁷ China and Russia are identified as trying to replace a weakening liberal post-Second World War order with authoritarian models that provide them veto power over other states’ affairs.²⁸ Furthermore, the NDS notes that the US is facing renewed military competition, which attenuates the military’s dominance across domains.²⁹ From this, the NDS describes “long-term strategic competition” occurring both diplomatically and militarily.

At the service level, the US Navy’s 2018 *A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority/Version 2.0* (“*Design 2.0*”) largely mirrors the NDS. It identifies China and Russia as threats because (a) they seek to revise the international system’s rules to reflect their own preferences, (b) their gains in power come at the expense of the US, and (c) “Eurasia could once again be dominated by rivals.”³⁰ In response, it instructs the Navy to compete sustainably over an “infinite” timeframe and prepare to control high-end maritime conflict.³¹ *Design 2.0* imagines the range of responsibilities for a military force along a “competition-conflict spectrum” and notes that the US Navy risks shortcomings a both high-end, state-on-state conflict and lower-intensity operations that fall below the level of armed conflict (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The competition-conflict spectrum for the military dimension of power



Source: Chief of Naval Operations, *A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority/Version 2.0*, December 2018, 5.

Note: EMW=electromagnetic maneuver warfare; C4ISR-T=command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and targeting.

²⁷ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge*, 2018, 2.

²⁸ Ibid.

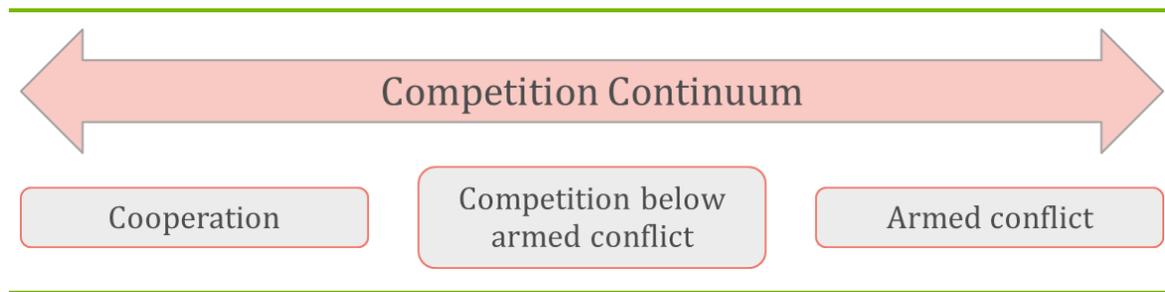
²⁹ Ibid., 3.

³⁰ Chief of Naval Operations, *A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority 2.0*, 3.

³¹ Ibid., 4.

Joint Doctrine Note (JDN) 1-19 represents the most recent publicly released DOD thinking on what GPC entails and how the services should prepare to engage in it. JDN 1-19 conceptualizes GPC (Figure 3) as a continuum with three segments—cooperation, competition below the level of armed conflict, and armed conflict.³² The document argues that there are no clear, clean breaks between the categories, which (alongside *Design 2.0*'s depiction) is a notable distinction from more clearly demarcated typologies, like the one with which we began this section.

Figure 3. The Competition Continuum (via JDN 1-19)



Source: CNA, based on the continuum described in Joint Doctrine Note 1-19, *Competition Continuum*.

JDN 1-19 characterizes cooperation as an enduring activity with allies and partners and occasionally pursued with neutrals and adversaries. It can range from security assistance and cooperation to multinational military operations during armed conflict.³³ Competition below the level of armed conflict (CBAC) is also an enduring activity, characterized by indirect efforts such as propaganda, influence campaigns, subversion, and economic warfare.³⁴ The document warns that there are no quick results, and so failing to provide sustained, sufficient resourcing to the DOD in a CBAC environment may lead to the erosion of America's strategic position over time. Armed conflict has a relatively standard definition, but the JDN notes that cooperation and CBAC still occur and matters even within a period of conflict.³⁵ Finally, the JDN holds that DOD planners should think of campaigning through, rather than in, each continuum segment, recognizing that these are not objectives but means for achieving political goals.³⁶

³² Joint Doctrine Note 1-19, *Competition Continuum*, June 3, 2019.

³³ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, vi.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

The JDN's conceptualization is notable for including cooperation as an element in great power relations and the role of cooperation in addressing competition. However, even this spectrum likely can be improved to deliver greater clarity and value to policymakers. Despite its inclusion of cooperation as an element of the spectrum, the document can be tendentious in its description of great power relations as necessarily or primarily conflictual. This tendency, which we find across strategies, produces three risks for policymakers to consider:

1. Framing US relations with Russia and China purely in terms of competition risks stifling whatever opportunities may exist for beneficial cooperation. Most IR frameworks encourage, in at least some contexts, the value of identifying points of cooperation with other great powers. Recent US strategies often frame potential great power adversaries exclusively in terms of competition, which may obfuscate opportunities for areas of cooperation that are in the US interest.
2. Competition's implicit focus on China and Russia does not address the potential for other states to be, or to become, great powers (as explored above). Those powers may emerge, or be cultivated through US policy to serve, as potential sources of cooperation or balancing in great power dynamics,
3. By narrowly associating "competition" with great power adversaries and "cooperation" with allies and partners, strategies risk obscuring the reality that allies can and do compete with one another, just as adversaries can occasionally cooperate.³⁷

Another area for improvement is the characterization of the spectrum itself. Violence and coercion are often radical breaks separating other categories of interaction and disrupting the smoothness of a spectrum. Should it be technically feasible to exist on multiple places simultaneously along the spectrum with a given country, armed conflict will likely end cooperation with an adversary and make CBAC a low priority. The spectrum further suggests that all the points on it represent different values of a shared variable, which is not clarified. Doing so would make it easier to understand where relations exist on the spectrum and how they can be moved to advantage US interests. Possible options for drawing out such a variable include clash of interests or the degree of coercion required to achieve a settlement on an issue.

The ideas behind the NDS, *Design 2.0*, and JDN 1-19 (among others) offer a roadmap for reorienting the DOD to great power interactions, but require further analytical work to capture the full scope of a complicated international dynamic. One avenue for drawing out these dynamics is to better understand the fundamental assumptions these documents make about how powerful states behave. These assumptions (strategies' underlying theories and constructs of interstate relations) often remain implicit and relatively unchallenged. The next section lays out the essential ways one can answer the question, "How do states interact?" and

³⁷ A point recognized in JDN 1-19: "Just as competitors can cooperate, friendly states can compete" (p. 1).

elaborates on what this might mean for policymakers. In short, what drives competition between states?

Why do great powers compete and fight?

Laying out prevalent frameworks of international relations highlights for practitioners the critical tools leveraged by analysts and scholars to explain interstate dynamics, including war. A brief description of these theories can also help practitioners understand which arguments and assumptions their worldviews invoke, as well as encourage reflection on when new arguments explain reality better. Any theory is imperfect, however, so we also include short critiques where relevant to provide some important caveats and counterpoints to each framework. Readers interested in more-detailed examinations of any of the topics or frameworks described below should consult the appendix for other, related sources.

Polarity

Polarity is a way of describing and analyzing the structure of the international system,³⁸ given a certain number of “poles” (i.e., great powers or superpowers). Unipolarity, bipolarity, and multipolarity are the usual distinctions. Polarity is one of the rare theoretical concepts that have been widely taken up by policymakers and senior national political leaders. In the past decade, Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, and the US National Intelligence Council’s *Global Trends* report have all invoked multipolarity to describe the political structure of the world.³⁹

US government policy statements and publications make it clear that officials anticipate or believe they are moving into a non-unipolar era.⁴⁰ Furthermore, prominent IR scholars have (repeatedly) predicted the demise of the US’s unipolar “moment” and the return of bi- or multipolarity.⁴¹ Although the US government appears to have settled into the assumption that the world is or will soon be multipolar, it is worth interrogating this assumption more deeply.

³⁸ In the practical sense, a “system” in international relations is the geographic area relevant to a state’s foreign policy. Thus, a state like the United States usually operates in a *global* system but sometimes makes policy relevant to *regional* systems. Other states operate predominantly in a regional system, but may occasionally operate in a global system.

³⁹ Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, “The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century: China’s Rise and the Fate of America’s Global Position,” *International Security* 40, no. 3 (2015).

⁴⁰ National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds*, NIC 2012-001, 2012.

⁴¹ Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise,” *International Security* 17, no. 4 (1993); Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics”; Christopher Layne, “The Waning of US Hegemony—Myth or Reality,” *International Security* 34, no. 1 (2009).

Is unipolarity over? Critically considering this question is essential because great power incentives for cooperation and competition can change dramatically, depending on the polarity involved and the international structure.

Observers disagree on the range of possible futures and how polarity will manifest itself. One French analyst, for example, writes that the coming century will be marked by “disordered bipolarity,” in which the US and China will be the poles, while cyber-weapons and high-speed connectivity will drive disorder.⁴² In contrast, others see the coming age not as a return to classical great power politics, but as a blend of unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar worlds, in which cooperation will be the crucial aspect of interstate relations.⁴³

Still others—primarily those who distinguish between superpowers and major powers (or lesser great powers)—maintain that US unipolarity persists and will endure. Only the United States currently meets one definition’s requirement that a pole-worthy great power have global force-projection capabilities.⁴⁴ However, China’s development of a blue-water navy may one day allow it to project force throughout the system, and countries with nuclear weapons are “major” powers able to deter the United States from military action against them. A similar argument is that China is a rising superpower and has a way to go before its technological innovation and military might merit superpower status. This view holds that the world remains unipolar but could, over the coming decades, become bipolar.⁴⁵ An even stronger skepticism invokes the idea of an enduring *primacy* (unrivalled influence over global life, not simply unipolarity). Such a line of thought holds that although great power competition has returned, the US remains incomparable in terms of military power and global projection.⁴⁶ Thus as a matter of policy, this argument would maintain that the US can and should continue to pursue primacy as a primary security policy aim.

These dissenters are not necessarily correct in their estimations, but their disagreements with typical policy statements of a return to multipolarity underscore how changes in definitions and frameworks for global relations can radically change how leaders perceive and describe

⁴² Beatrice Heuser, “Reflections on the Purposes, Benefits, and Pitfalls of Military Exercises,” in *Military Exercises: Political Messaging and Strategic Impact*, ed. Beatrice Heuser, Tormod Heier, and Guillaume Lasconjarias (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2018).

⁴³ Michael J. Mazarr, “This Is Not a Great-Power Competition: Why the Term Doesn’t Capture Today’s Reality,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 29, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2019-05-29/not-great-power-competition>.

⁴⁴ Monteiro, “Unrest Assured: Why Unipolarity is not Peaceful.”

⁴⁵ Brooks and Wohlforth, “The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century.”

⁴⁶ Hal Brands, “American grand strategy in the post-Cold War era,” in *New Directions in Strategic Thinking 2.0*, ed. Russell Glenn (Canberra: ANU Press, 2018).

the world. Policymakers should consider this critically. The number of poles can dramatically reshape the incentives for cooperation and competition that states face. If the world is unipolar, most states will continue to have strong incentives to cooperate with the US. If it is bipolar, the US should make deterring or managing the other pole a guiding focus of its foreign policy. If it is multipolar, the US should prepare to operate as just another state among several with similar capabilities, all competing for dominance.

Nonetheless, polarity alone is not a sufficient principle to make robust policy. First, polarity by itself does not offer much help for thinking about change in the international system.⁴⁷ Second, it is unclear how the existence of a superpower and unipolarity affect the existence or importance of other great powers.⁴⁸ Third, unipolarity and hegemony are often used interchangeably, but they are not synonymous. Polarity refers to the distribution of capabilities or power, with unipolarity as an extreme position on that spectrum. Hegemony, by contrast, sits on a separate spectrum describing the degree of freedom of choice enjoyed by powerful states in the system.⁴⁹

The balance of power

The balance of power is a fundamental concept in IR explaining great power relations. However, the term is subject to some confusion. The balance of power refers to the comparative strength of two states or blocs and implicitly suggests a perfectly balanced equilibrium between two sides. Yet it is often used as a way of describing a disequilibrium of power that favors one side.⁵⁰ The distribution of power refers to the power each great power possesses in the international system and is thus a clearer way of describing disequilibria that favor one side over the other.⁵¹ Balancing is the strategy of attempting to actualize balance of

⁴⁷ In his *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz did not include any mechanism for explaining changes from one type of polarity to another.

⁴⁸ During the Cold War, the United States and Soviet Union's roles as the superpowers in a bipolar system has raised the question of whether the existence of superpowers makes the concept of great powers obsolete or irrelevant. Most observers implicitly acknowledge that great powers exist as an important tier of states below the superpower level. Others distinguish between a unipolar superpower and lesser states.

⁴⁹ The spectrum has roughly three points—balance, hegemony, and empire. Raymond Aron, *Peace and War* (New York: Praeger, 1968); Thomas S. Mowle and David Sacko, *The Unipolar World: An Unbalanced Future* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

⁵⁰ T. V. Paul, James Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, *Balance of Power in the 21st Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 30.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

power theory (although the desired outcome could be either a balance of power or a favorable disequilibrium).⁵²

According to the balance-of-power framework, all rational leaders fear that other states will seek to dominate or conquer them, and so will build up their own military (internal balancing) or create alliances in a multipolar system (external balancing) in order to counter powerful or threatening states.⁵³

One basic disagreement is whether balances emerge automatically or only through the deliberate efforts of policymakers.⁵⁴ There is also disagreement over whether states balance against power or threats. Those in the power camp argue that states cannot know whether another state's preponderant power might one day be turned against them; thus all power is a threat.⁵⁵ Those arguing that states balance against threats factor in power but also acknowledge that states differ in who and what they view as threats according to history, geography, and diplomacy; this view preserves state agency and distinctiveness.⁵⁶ Finally, there is disagreement about whether states seek an equal balance of power or a disequilibrium in their favor.⁵⁷

Those who believe that states balance against power because they are inherently afraid and suspicious of all other states may try to make the military as strong as possible, make the likelihood of others balancing against the US cost-prohibitive, and minimize US dependence on alliances. Those who believe that states balance against threat may be prepared to pursue a flexible alliance policy in which an alliance—even with Russia or China—to counter other, more threatening great powers may not be ruled out should world power dynamics change sufficiently in the future.

Structural realism

In the IR discipline, structural realists assume that states inhabit a “self-help” system whose ordering principle is anarchical, that they struggle to communicate with one another, and that

⁵² Ibid., 39.

⁵³ William C. Wohlforth, Richard Little, Stuart J. Kaufman, David Kang, Charles A. Jones et al., “Testing Balance-of-Power Theory in World History,” *European Journal of International Relations* 13, no. 2 (2007): 157.

⁵⁴ Paul, Wirtz, and Fortmann, *Balance of Power in the 21st Century*, chapter 1.

⁵⁵ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

⁵⁶ Stephen M. Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” *International Security* 9, no. 4 (1985).

⁵⁷ Paul, Wirtz, and Fortmann, *Balance of Power in the 21st Century*.

they are motivated primarily by a desire to survive.⁵⁸ Structural realists predict that competition between states will be frequent, and that states will care about their power relative to other states (rather than power in absolute terms). The balance of power will be important for preserving peace. From here, the concept further divides into two major subsets of systemic/structural realism: offensive and defensive.

Offensive realism's core assumptions are that all states aspire to maximize their power relative to their foes, and that all states aspire to regional and universal hegemony. Great powers seize every opportunity to revise the distribution of power in their favor when the cost is low enough. They ardently oppose similar efforts by other powerful states in order to ensure that another state does not attain regional or universal hegemony. In the offensive realist worldview, cooperation is rare; on those occasions when it does emerge, mistrust is rife. Wars occur whenever the distribution of power is not in equal balance, as states favored by the disequilibrium would want to press their advantage and acquire more power or territory.⁵⁹ Those who subscribe to this view of states and their motivations should expect the US to try to prevent the rise of great powers that bid for hegemony in their own region and challenge US regional hegemony.

However, offensive realism has its theoretical drawbacks. It expects the United States to be actively seeking global hegemony. It has predicted that Europe could fracture and that a balancing coalition might emerge against the United States in the post-Cold War era. Furthermore, the theory is somewhat indeterminate: while it predicts behavior and actions, it makes no predictions about when these actions will occur, complicating efforts to refute or validate it.⁶⁰

To illustrate with a concrete example, consider the United States and China in East Asia. According to offensive realism, China expects the US to try to prevent its rise, and the US expects China to try to challenge it. Thus China's construction and expansion of islands and airstrips in the South China Sea is driven by any state's natural drive for more power and is enabled by insufficient counterbalancing by the United States and China's East Asian competitors. Offensive realism would expect vigorous and proactive efforts by the US to stifle the rise of any other regional hegemon, and it would prescribe US attempts to extend its

⁵⁸ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*. Another important, although controversial, assumption is that states should generally be "black-boxed"—that is, their distinguishing domestic features should be ignored. This is done in pursuit of theoretical parsimony since the theory's proponents have argued that states have structural incentives to imitate the arrangements of the most successful state in the system.

⁵⁹ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 1-4.

⁶⁰ Paul, Wirtz, and Fortmann, *Balance of Power in the 21st Century*, 71.

hegemony globally—only then would its security from a regional hegemonic rival be sufficiently secure.

Defensive realism assumes that states prioritize security and survival and are not prone to risk-taking or war-making, both of which threaten security and survival.⁶¹ Because states cannot be sure about other states' true and future intentions, they cannot be sure that others are not "wolves in sheep's clothing." As a result, states arm to ensure their own security, which prompts other states to arm in turn and results in an overall decrease in all states' security—a phenomenon known as the "security dilemma."⁶² However, because defensive realism assumes that great powers are inherently defensively oriented, wars should not result every time there is a disequilibrium of power. Instead, war is often a result of miscalculation or an arms race fueled by the security dilemma.

Defensive realism also has its drawbacks—namely, its assumption that all states are essentially defensive and that they struggle to communicate credibly with one another. The first belies the observation that some states appear truly aggressive, or are willing to act so. Second, states may in fact be highly confident of other states' intentions on occasion. Some defensive realist theorists agree that states can communicate effectively, but vary on whether this is limited to costly signals or can include diplomacy and other information.⁶³

Illustrating with the China-US case again, let us assume that both states are inherently defensive and nonaggressive. The US recognizes that China's power is growing; it may be able to know that China today does not pose a threat, but it cannot be sure that China will not choose to be aggressive sometime in the future when it is even stronger. Thus while the US has an advantage, it will build up its military—let us say the Navy and the Marines in particular—to enhance its security and discourage Chinese aggression. China sees the US military buildup and cannot be sure that the US does not intend to use its Navy and Marines to attack China or Chinese equities while it is weaker than the US. In response, China builds up its military, develops counters to US force-projection capabilities, and seizes or constructs islands to make any US operations more difficult. These capabilities could be acquired simply in order to prevent US operations—but US officials cannot be sure that they will not simultaneously enable further Chinese aggression and deter the United States from defending the victims. And so the spiral continues. Eventually, the escalating, unsustainable costs of the spiraling counter-measures, growing mistrust, or simple miscalculation may produce war.

⁶¹ For examples of defensive realism, see Robert Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978); Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

⁶² Jervis, "Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma."

⁶³ Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics*.

The rise and fall of hegemons

A fundamental challenge with offensive and defensive realism is that both consider static systems—not what drives change within and between systems. After all, changes can be sources of friction and thus conflict. Instead of studying a single system, some scholars study the rise and fall of hegemons and the systems they construct as a means to explain great power relations and the occurrence of war. Because of their focus on changes and challenges to an existing hegemon, theories in this vein may be of particular interest today. This approach to understanding state behavior may in fact come closest to capturing the spirit of the NDS, NSS, and *Design 2.0*. These frameworks are collectively known as hegemonic stability theory/power transition theory (HST/PTT).

Both frameworks focus on cycles of power shifts and imagine a more ordered world than that attached to defensive or offensive realism. In HST/PTT, a preponderantly powerful state in the system, the hegemon, has an outsized role in determining system-wide institutional structures constraining all states, including the hegemon. However, as the power gap closes between the hegemon and another great power, the rising power is prone to challenge the existing hegemon in an effort to rewrite rules in its own favor. Thus, the logic predicts that war between great powers becomes more likely as the distribution of power favors the hegemon less over time.⁶⁴

The more one follows this logic, the more one would focus narrowly on China, the only state apparently positioned to challenge the United States for global leadership in the coming years. The US would need to be wary of states unhappy with the US-led system (e.g., Russia), but would also need to recognize that resistance from such states was empowered by the existence of a challenge from China. If one believes that a US decline and China's rise are unstoppable, accommodation and appeasement would be advised in order to avoid an otherwise inevitable war.⁶⁵ If war can stop the relative slide of the US, one possible (if uncomfortable) conclusion is to endorse a "preventive" war while the distribution of power favors the United States.

Some approaches suggest that a narrowing gap will lead to war only if the rising state has a dramatically different form of government than the hegemon. These approaches hold that a hegemon designs a system that benefits its own form of government and practice, so states with similar forms will benefit more than those with dissimilar forms. This is particularly true

⁶⁴ For two classic statements, see A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981). For a more recent review of hegemon studies by a leading scholar, see G. John Ikenberry and Daniel H. Nexon, "Hegemony Studies 3.0: The Dynamics of Hegemonic Orders," *Security Studies* 28, no. 3 (2019).

⁶⁵ For a prominent observer's recent argument in favor of this, see Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape the Thucydides Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), xvii-xix.

when a powerful state creates institutions that constrain its own actions, thereby reassuring other countries that the hegemon can be trusted.⁶⁶ Thus similar states will not view the competition and conflict required to take over and re-create the system worth the substantial cost involved.⁶⁷ For example, under the hypothetical of a powerful, united EU, one would expect Europe to support rather than challenge the US-led order.

Like the theories above, frameworks on power transition are not free from debate. Arguments are levied particularly against the notion that the dynamic of rising and falling powers is inevitably the source of conflict (what has become known colloquially as the “Thucydides Trap”). Many scholars contend that such framing does not match the historical record for how notable conflicts actually began, including the Peloponnesian War (on which Thucydides wrote).⁶⁸

Liberal alternatives

So far, we have described frameworks predicated mostly on the atomized relationship between states. Institutional IR worldviews, by contrast, build on different foundations, including Immanuel Kant’s ideas about democracy and free commerce as keys to a pacific world order.⁶⁹ There are two primary variants of these institution- and value-oriented frameworks (liberalism, broadly)—one focused on international structure, the other on domestic politics.

Structural liberalism argues that international institutions (which can range from formal organizations to more nebulous international regimes of norms and codified practices) help states overcome concerns about free-riding and defection, which realists believe impede sustained international cooperation and encourage international competition and conflict.⁷⁰ Arguments in this category often ascribe this pacifying effect to globalization or political clubs, and emphasize their norm-setting and cooperation-inducing effects more than the arguments in the HST/PTT tradition. Note that structural liberalism still shares bedrock assumptions with

⁶⁶ G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁶⁷ Ikenberry and Nexon, “Hegemony Studies 3.0.”

⁶⁸ Arthur Waldron, “There is no Thucydides Trap,” *supchina*, 6/12/2017, 2017, <https://supchina.com/2017/06/12/no-thucydides-trap/>.

⁶⁹ Note that this is sometimes also called liberalism, which is used in the classical sense, rather than the meaning attached to it in US politics.

⁷⁰ For a classic statement, see Robert Axelrod and Robert O. Keohane, “Achieving Cooperation under Anarchy: Strategies and Institutions,” *World Politics* 38, no. 1 (1985). For a US-focused argument, see Ikenberry, *After Victory*.

realism (that the world is anarchic and that states seek security), but envisions a trajectory to a more collaborative world by arguing that international institutions help states overcome these problems. The more one shares these assumptions, the more one should expect frequent and sustained engagement, even cooperation among great powers that participate in international regimes. This effectively defined the US approach to China in the 1990s and early 2000s, expecting that integrating China further into international institutions (such as the World Trade Organization) would moderate China's overall orientation toward a US-led world order and even promote long-term domestic moderation.

Domestic liberalism focuses on the latter part of that point, how domestic politics shape foreign policy. This strand of institutionalism explores how polity type and structure shape how the interests of domestic constituencies are represented in international affairs.⁷¹ Arguments about how democracies do not fight one another (democratic peace theory), or why certain types of nondemocratic or quasi-democratic states (e.g., "illiberal" or "managed" democracies) may be more or less likely to pursue aggressive foreign policies fall in this category.⁷² Furthermore, this branch of liberalism includes arguments that explain international competition and conflict with reference to ideologies and forms of government. For example, one observer recently argued that inherent tensions between democratic and authoritarian ideologies, particularly their difficulty in compromising with one another, play an important and underappreciated role in fueling competition between the US and Russia and China.⁷³ The more one thinks that ideology is a core priority in the decision-making of great power leaders, all else being equal, the more one should expect great powers with different ideologies to mistrust and compete with one another, and the more one should expect great powers with similar or the same ideologies to cooperate. If one holds that states are fundamentally driven by universalized national interests, defined principally by the pursuit of power or security, one might alternatively deemphasize this focus on domestic institutions and constituencies.

⁷¹ Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997).

⁷² For the original statement of the "liberal peace" thesis, see Michael W. Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12, no. 3 (1983).

⁷³ Hal Brands, "Democracy vs Authoritarianism: How Ideology Shapes Great-Power Conflict," *Survival* 60, no. 5 (2018).

Conclusions

What does great power competition mean and why might it be happening? This paper deconstructed those questions to look deeper at what makes powers great and how various IR frameworks describe great power interaction under different conditions. This is important for policy, as great power competition is one component of the broader dynamic of great power relations, which manifest differently according to the structure of the international system and how analysts understand the fundamental principles of global politics. The intention is to pull the critical assumptions built into policy to the fore, facilitating dialogue on a dynamic shift in US national security focus. Some of those assumptions are shared across US policy, including:

- Definitions of great power competition in US government sources draw from multiple traditions in IR, with some notable commonalities. GPC as described in government documents is firmly rooted in a multipolar worldview and aims for a focus on balance of power; hence the documents can more accurately be described as prescribing a distribution of power between the US, China, and Russia (and their allies) that predominantly favors the US.
- Another line of commonality can be found in the 2017 NSS, 2018 unclassified NDS, and the Navy's 2018 *Design 2.0* references to realist arguments about the dangers posed by other states making gains relative to the United States. This line of thought is amplified by discussions on competition other than armed conflict; such discussions hew to a traditional realist view that all elements of state power form the basis for international might and influence. Relatedly, statements on great power competition invoke the idea that GPC is driven in part by the rise and fall of hegemons, a thread that runs through the NSS, NDS, and *Design 2.0*. The fear that China may overtake the United States and, in light of that, challenge the free and open liberal international order exemplifies some of the discourse on hegemons and transitions of power.
- A moral line of thought across much of US foreign policy remains prominent despite the shift to GPC. Strategies and policy statements invoking the value of democracies as US allies and the risks posed by revisionist, authoritarian regimes to US interests suggest that the long American tradition of a foreign policy informed by liberalism remains influential in how senior leaders view the world and communicate to audiences at home and abroad.

As this paper shows, the various approaches that serve as the bases for US foreign-policy draw from different assumptions, predictions, and recommendations about the world, some of which can be contradictory. It is important to voice these contradictions to ensure that US strategy represents a coherent and logically consistent approach to the world.

To summarize, what follow are some fundamental descriptions and prescriptions made by the common IR frameworks we explored as they relate to the “what” and “why” of GPC:

- A world where aggression and competition is increasing all around may be best described by offensive realism, which would encourage assertive measures by the US to prevent other regions from uniting and thus unable to challenge the United States.
- A world in which both the US and another state fall into a cycle of arms races, posturing, and suspicion despite desires to prioritize security over aggrandizement is one that may be better described by defensive realism. This worldview would suggest that increased communication, carefully calibrated costly signals, and treaty commitments could help reassure both states of the other’s benign intentions.
- A world increasingly riven by an ever-rising China and a stalling United States may be best described by hegemonic stability theory/power transition theory frameworks. These approaches could be fatalistic, leading to the conclusion that only a reversal of the trends could guarantee continued US predominance. Depending on the degree of pessimism about China’s intentions and the political evolution of the Chinese government, HST/PTT frameworks could suggest policy options ranging from preventive war to accommodation.
- A world where previously hostile authoritarian states become both democracies and US friends might signal a best fit with domestic liberalism frameworks. Such a view would encourage the United States to keep close ties with the world’s democracies, since war is all but unheard of between democracies, but would admonish the United States to be wary of authoritarian states and to seek to encourage them to become full-fledged democracies in pursuit of greater international stability.

Finally, this survey surfaced some pitfalls that an explicitly competitive worldview produces.

1. Framing relations with Russia and China purely in terms of competition risks stifling opportunities for cooperation, which most theories encourage in at least some way.
2. GPC’s focus on Russia and China belies the fact that other states may be or become great powers, serving as potential sources of cooperation or balancing for the US.
3. By associating “competition” with adversaries and “cooperation” with allies, such terminology risks obscuring the fact that just as adversaries can cooperate, so too can allies compete.⁷⁴ The answer to these challenges is not to abandon DOD’s competitive lens, which is fundamental to the role of the armed forces. Nevertheless, policymakers should strive to ensure that the ways leaders and strategies describe the world do not inadvertently shape events to be more competitive than they might otherwise be.

⁷⁴ Again, a point recognized in Joint Doctrine Note 1-19.

Recommendations

IR frameworks offer policymakers structured ways of taking a complex world and identifying its most important features. These frameworks and their assumptions shape how we assess critical questions of war and peace, consequently shaping the strategies we devise to manage global challenges. Leveraging our exploration of these concepts, we conclude with four recommendations for strategy and for the policymakers who implement them.

1. **Consider great power relations.** Instead of regarding GPC as a catchall rubric, policymakers should think about the current era as one of great power *relations*. By making competition a ubiquitous descriptor, the US risks the inverse of what some see as a mistaken understanding of the post-Cold War period as one of great power cooperation. In other words, we risk ignoring other aspects of great power relations. Competition is a natural part of those relations, one that is certainly more relevant today than in the 1990s. Yet policy would be advantaged by placing competition in the wider frame of great power relations, thereby producing policies that account for opportunities for cooperation with adversaries when it is in the US interest and competition with other great powers if needed.
2. **Clarify the strategic implications of conflict continuums.** DOD often uses spectrums to describe GPC, but this depiction requires addressing several challenges. What factors or variables inform the continuum? Can the US be at several points on the continuum at the same time with the same state? Are there multiple continuums for such scenarios? In short, how can policymakers operationalize the concept of spectrums to improve competition (and cooperation) at all levels of great power relations? Addressing these questions will help transition the concept of a GPC spectrum to a strategically valuable means of construing great power relations.
3. **Make informed assumptions and ensure they are explicit in planning.** This paper provides policymakers with more tools to articulate how their theories of international politics influence their assessments and strategies. If leaders and strategies elaborate their worldviews transparently, they will encourage more constructive debates that engage with specific underlying assumptions about global dynamics, thereby promoting more cogent iterations of strategy.
4. **Note the indicators and warnings for our frameworks.** Regardless of the particular theories or worldviews one uses to make sense of national security challenges, it is important to clarify the objective signposts that indicate whether our prevailing concepts do or do not best reflect reality. In other words, if the world and your expectations of it do not align, it is not the world that is wrong; it is your theory of it that is wrong.

Appendix: Additional reading

For readers interested in further work on how the international system affects and constrains states:

Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, chapters 3, 5, 6, for the crux of Waltz's commonly cited argument in IR scholarship.

John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, for the classic statement of "offensive" realism.

Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics*, for a nuanced version of realism that incorporates some "signaling."

For critical responses to some of the works above:

Robert O. Keohane, *Neorealism and Its Critics*, for critical responses to Waltz.

Paul Schroeder, "Historical Reality vs. Neorealist Theory," *International Security* 19, no.1 (1994) for a historical analysis of whether the "neorealist" approach has merit.

For readers interested in how declining hegemons and power transitions can affect international politics:

Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, for the classic statement of hegemonic stability theory.

A. F. K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger*, for another classic statement in this vein.

Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts*, for a recent work on this topic.

For readers interested in how international rules and institutions affect state behavior:

G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*, for the classic statement of how the US built a durable postwar order.

Helen V. Milner, *Interests, Institutions, and Information: Domestic Politics and International Relations*.

John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3 (1994–95) for a skeptical take on such arguments.

For readers interested in how governments and domestic politics affect state behavior:

Robert D. Putnam, "Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games," *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (1988) for an explanation of how leaders' relationships with international and domestic audiences influence signals and bargaining.

Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes*, for an argument about why and when armies of dictators are militarily effective.

Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War*, for an argument for the superior martial ability of democracies compared to nondemocracies.

Alexander B. Downes, "How Smart and Tough are Democracies? Reassessing Theories of Democratic Victory in War," *International Security* 33, no. 4 (2009) for a challenge to Reiter and Stam.

For readers interested in how individuals affect state behavior in international affairs:

Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, for a wide-ranging examination of how individual perception and misperception influence behavior and create blind spots.

Hans J. Morgenthau and Kenneth W. Thompson, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace, Brief Edition*, an edited version of the classic's sixth edition, highlighting the central theme of linking an individual's will to power with competitive interstate relations.

Jack S. Levy, "Prospect Theory, Rational Choice, and International Relations," *International Studies Quarterly* 41, no.1 (1997) for an examination of how psychological bias toward reference points affects leader calculations and incentives.

For readers interested in competing analyses of the security dilemma:

Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (1978) for the classic statement explaining what the security dilemma is and how it works.

Randall L. Schweller, "Neorealism's Status-Quo Bias: What Security Dilemma?" *Security Studies* 5, no. 3 (1996) for an argument that the security dilemma is not real.

For readers interested in the origins of war:

Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict*, for an argument that misperception is the main driver of war.

Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, for a more direct explanation of war.

James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (1995) for an argument explaining why wars are still possible even if states communicate perfectly.

Jonathan Kirshner, "Rationalist Explanations for War?" *Security Studies* 10, no. 1 (2000) for a challenge to Fearon's argument.

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