

Great Power Competition – Missing the Mark?

It's inevitable that where there's power, there's competition. But does that actually imply a threat...or even the potential for conflict? "Great Power Competition" is how the most recent National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy named this shift in focus away from terrorism and transnational threats towards Russia and China. So what does this actually mean?

First, it means the U.S. likes labels. Cold War, War on Terror, Asia Pivot, and now Great Power Competition. Yet this goes beyond being able to name an enemy. Adversaries become enemies in actual conflict. Maintaining national (and global) security is about preparedness while preventing conflict. Likewise, competition typically yields a winner and a loser, but does not necessarily include a physical or existential threat. The Cold War ended a battle of ideologies. The goal of the War on Terror has been to thwart non-state threat actors. What exactly is to be won in this new competition?

This is also not your parent's great power competition. Grouping Russia and China into the "great power" category may be convenient, but impractical. The last great power contest – the Cold War – had two, not multiple, opponents. Russia today is not the U.S.S.R., no matter how hard it may be trying to regain that stature. China is also a different beast. China lacks war experience and faces potential for miscalculation and surprise. Unlike Russia (for now), China shares no deterrence construct, arms control, or inspections regimes. Approaching the U.S. in economic power, China can't be easily exhausted in an arms race. While peer competitors wield a multitude of damaging weapons, cyber operations and electronic warfare are a modern reminder that adept threat actors of any size can inflict considerable damage.

If Great Power Competition simply means maintaining military superiority against any and all adversaries, then the moniker risks falling short again. The U.S. military still needs to modernize systems and forces, innovate technologically, and deconstruct bureaucratic obstacles in order to create the agile, adaptable and ready forces the U.S. needs today and in the future. While Russia and China may be the only two challenging the U.S. in scale and scope in these areas, great power competition should not be a synonym for preparedness. This definition also neglects larger fields of competition. With a full commitment of all elements of national power, Russia and China leverage a full range of political, economic, and social assets to expand their influence, as well as intimidate their partners and opponents. The National Defense Strategy advocates a cross-agency approach and partnerships, but agencies are not that coordinated (or cooperative) and the U.S. may now have to compete for partners.

There's no denying that Russia and China have driven the reemergence of long-term strategic competition. Russia and China both want to overturn the current rules-based international order. Both nations are aggressively targeting and challenging American capabilities. And both Russia and China are trying to weaken the American network of allies and partners. They share a goal to negate our military's ability to project forces when and where needed and sustain them. These are serious challenges, indeed. However, the Great Power Competition label has – so far – not provided much guidance on strategy or constructs for policy. It also relegates a range of more immediate threats and actors, such as climate change and Iran. A rose by any other name may smell as sweet, but "Great Power Competition" may not make the nation as secure.