



Strategic Competition and U.S. National Strategies

Matthew Neumeyer

George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies,

<http://www.marshallcenter.org>

Abstract: Strategic competition has significantly reframed American strategic thought, particularly its national security and military strategies, by defining the threats to American primacy and the rules-based international order posed mainly by China and Russia. However, the term “strategic competition” is not universally understood within the U.S. government, leading to varying perspectives on how to proceed. Additionally, it does not adequately address how competitors approach international competition, creating a risk of miscalculation and an increased chance of conflict. Finally, for the United States, strategic competition establishes a framework that perpetuates challenges for American strategy and the use of elements of national power. While “strategic competition” is necessary to focus and drive American strategy and strategic calculus, it is also a vague and imperfect construct that could lead decision-makers down consequential paths.

Keywords: strategic competition, national security strategy, Russia, China, Thucydides Trap.

Introduction

Strategic competition is the current buzzphrase in American strategy, designed to capture the essence of the United States’ strategic framework. Like many catchphrases, it both succeeds and fails in equal measure. Both strategic competition and its predecessor, great power competition, have helped significantly shape American strategic thought, particularly in national security and military strategies. Strategic competition has also helped define the threats to American primacy and the rules-based international order it underpins, primarily from China and, to a lesser degree, Russia.

However, the term “strategic competition” is not universally understood within the U.S. government, resulting in differing perspectives on how to proceed. Moreover, it fails to adequately address how competitors approach international competition, creating a risk of miscalculation and increasing the chance of conflict. Finally, for the United States, strategic competition reinforces a conceptual framework known as the Thucydides Trap, perpetuating dilemmas for American strategy and its use of elements of national power. While strategic competition is necessary to focus and drive American strategy and strategic calculus, it is also a vague and risky term – an imperfect construct that can lead decision-makers down consequential paths.

This article attempts to answer the following questions regarding U.S. perspectives on strategic competition: Why does the United States use “strategic competition” as an organizing construct for its strategy and strategic approach? How does this concept manifest in American strategy? And what challenges arise from the U.S. perspectives on strategic competition?

Why Strategic Competition?

U.S. strategies began incorporating the term “competition” as the United States started to reduce its commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, China’s economic rise accelerated, and Russia continued its aggressive actions in “the near abroad.” The Obama administration introduced “competition” into the national security strategy, launching its “pivot to the Pacific” to counter China’s growing power and recognizing Russia’s revanchist behavior, exemplified by the annexation of Crimea.¹ However, the specific terms and phrases “great power competition” and “strategic competition” were reintroduced into the American lexicon in the national security strategies of the Trump and Biden administrations, respectively. In both documents, these terms served as harbingers, framing the security context each administration sought to address.

Strategic competition is not a new term. Stephanie Winkler does an excellent job tracing its usage from the 1970s détente period of the Cold War through the second Bush administration to the Trump and Biden administrations. During the Cold War, the term was used to describe the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union. Over time, it evolved under the Bush, Trump, and Biden administrations to represent a “principal policy approach” – a goal to pursue.² However, as this article will argue, its current use in American strategy is problematic. Strategic competition is interpreted as both an end goal and a relational dynamic or as an objective versus a “state of play,” which leads to differing behaviors. Therefore, the U.S. dual interpretation of “strategic competition”

¹ Barack Obama, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: White House, February 2015), 24, 29, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf.

² Stephanie Christine Winkler, “Strategic Competition and US-China Relations: A Conceptual Analysis,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 2023): 333-356, 334-335, 353, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poad008>.

both helps and hinders. While the term helps clarify the security context and identify threats, it complicates U.S. actions when different branches of the government interpret its meaning inconsistently.³

How Did the U.S. Get to This Point?

The current security context results from the geopolitical shifts in the past forty years, including the end of the Cold War, America's unipolar moment, and subsequent actions by Russia and China. After the Cold War, the United States emerged as the singular superpower in the 1990s. A prevailing belief in both U.S. policy circles and academia was that promoting democratic reforms and economic prosperity for former adversaries—such as Russia, its satellites, and former Warsaw Pact states and Soviet republics—would render future conflicts unlikely. This logic extended to a rising China: as it integrated further into the international system of liberal economic and diplomatic norms, the forces of democratic reforms would naturally transition and align China's behavior, transforming it into a responsible member of the international order.⁴ Critics often summarize this optimistic worldview with the phrase “end of history,” an allusion to Francis Fukuyama's book *The End of History and the Last Man*.⁵

This thinking permeated U.S. strategic thought as recently as the Obama administration, which stated in its national security strategy, “The United States welcomes the rise of a stable, peaceful, and prosperous China.”⁶ The United States and its allies equated “winning” the Cold War with a strategic approach for the future. The collective West believed that their victory would naturally lead to an era of prosperity and, subsequently, peace.⁷

However, various forces and events have created a very different security environment for the United States. First, American adversaries did not interpret the end of the Cold War similarly. They viewed the forces of liberal democracy

³ Winkler, “Strategic Competition and US-China Relations,” 334-335.

⁴ Congressional Research Service, *Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense – Issues for Congress*, R43838 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, May 16, 2023), 1 and Appendix A, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43838/95>; Donald Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, December 2017), 26, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

⁵ See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, NY: Maxwell Macmillan, 1992). The phrase from the book title “the end of history ...” became representative of the 1990's concept that theories touting liberal democracy represented the dominant reality in international relations. This strain of thought heavily influence U.S. strategic thought while it was the single superpower after the end of the Cold War and is referenced in current strategic competition strategies.

⁶ Obama, *National Security Strategy*, 24.

⁷ Joseph R. Biden, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: White House, October 2022), 8, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>; Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 26.

in the opposite manner – as threats to their regimes and control. Second, in the aftermath of its Cold War victory, the United States failed to establish a new strategy to safeguard its hard-won success. This lack of focus led to a haphazard approach to security, assuming that former adversaries would embrace liberal democracy and align with U.S. interests, even as those same adversaries sought ways to gain relative advantages. Third, following 9/11, the United States became engrossed in conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, committing to long-term counterinsurgency operations and nation-building efforts – both resource- and time-intensive endeavors.⁸

What's in a Name?

Recent American national strategies clearly articulate why strategic competition is necessary, and different administrations align in their terminology. Biden's national security strategy states this clearly in the President's introduction: "We are in the midst of a strategic competition to shape the future of the international order."⁹ While Trump's national security strategy introduction is framed around the idea of "America First," it similarly asserts that America's strength will bring advantages, leading to a "better future" and a "balance of power that favors the United States, [its] allies, and [its] partners."¹⁰ The United States uses strategic competition to reframe its strategic thinking from the post-Cold War era to a new construct with an old name, emphasizing that understanding and engaging in strategic competition is imperative for the nation's future.

In the current era, the terms "great power competition" and "strategic competition" re-emerged in U.S. strategic dialogue during the Trump and Biden administrations, respectively. Originally from the Cold War, these terms have become central to both administrations' strategies concerning goals, objectives, and priorities.¹¹ They form the lexicon used by U.S. government entities to justify their strategic actions, including but not limited to strategies, plans, priorities, and funding decisions.¹² However, neither administration provided a clear definition of these terms, leading to varied interpretations of what they mean. This lack of clarity manifests in slightly different approaches to addressing the problem, making it critical to understand how the United States perceives and implements strategic competition.¹³

⁸ Congressional Research Service, *Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense*, 1 and Appendix A, 38.

⁹ Biden, *National Security Strategy*, 2.

¹⁰ Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, ii.

¹¹ Winkler, "Strategic Competition and US-China Relations," 345, 249-350.

¹² Alexander Boroff, "What Is Great-Power Competition, Anyway?" *Modern War Institute at West Point*, April 17, 2020, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/great-power-competition-anyway/>.

¹³ Cornell Overfield, "Biden's 'Strategic Competition' Is a Step Back," *Foreign Policy*, October 13, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/13/biden-strategic-competition-national-defense-strategy/>.

Why Does American Perception Matter?

U.S. leaders and strategies have framed current geopolitical competition in ideological terms – democracy versus authoritarianism and a rules-based order versus revisionism and revanchism. This language positions the United States and its allies as defenders of the status quo, committed to preserving the existing world order while portraying China and Russia as revisionist powers seeking to subsume or reshape it.¹⁴ Even under the “America First” framework, the Trump administration characterized these “challenges” as contests between democratic and autocratic values.¹⁵ This ideological framing is crucial to understanding the American construct of strategic competition and its potential impact: by emphasizing the ideological component, the United States has positioned itself as the status quo power, championing liberal democracy and its values – a goal of significant importance.

Why Does America Perceive It This Way?

In the strategies of both the Trump and Biden administrations, the language reflects goals aimed at garnering allies and partners to uphold the rules-based international order. This is crucial for preserving the advantages the United States has enjoyed since the end of World War II and for maintaining its position of power relative to its rising competitors, particularly China. This emphasis on strategic competition mirrors a scholarly theme that situates the United States within the framework of the Thucydides Trap. In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides describes how war between Sparta and Athens became “inevitable” as the rising power of Athens threatened Sparta’s status quo advantage. This dynamic, he argues, traps both states in a cycle that leads to conflict.¹⁶ Understanding this mental model is essential for grasping how the United States perceives and approaches strategic competition, especially concerning China.

Why is this important? Academia often describes the Thucydides Trap as a likely progression toward conflict and war following an extended period of intense and contentious competition. Graham Allison provides the most notable exploration of this perspective in his aptly-titled 2017 book *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* In it, Allison examines the dynamics of the Thucydides Trap by analyzing historical patterns from sixteen sim-

¹⁴ Biden, *National Security Strategy*, 3, 7-9.

¹⁵ Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 3.

¹⁶ Thucydides, Robert B. Strassler, and Richard Crawley, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, 1st Touchstone ed. (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1998). In my experience, this book edition of Thucydides history is the one most commonly used in U.S. military professional military education.

ilar scenarios, highlighting how the circumstances between the United States and China mirror or parallel these classic examples.¹⁷

Shortly after the Cold War ended, some scholars began issuing warnings through this lens. For instance, in his 1995 book, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*, Donald Kagan warned that the optimistic declarations about the end of war and conflict were premature. While not directly naming Russia or China, Kagan argued that competition between states is natural and inevitable and that the United States should remain vigilant and prepared for this reality. At a time when many scholars were celebrating the triumph of international liberalism, Kagan's cautionary perspective underscored the importance of learning from history – urging Western democracies to preserve peace by being ready for conflict.¹⁸

The scholarship paradigm suggests that miscalculation could lead to conflict. In the United States, similar academic and conceptual rhetoric appears in national strategies, although there is no universally accepted American definition of “strategic competition” and what it entails. Hal Brands highlighted this tension in 2022, framing the competition between the United States and Russia and China in Thucydides' terms. He warned that this competition becomes particularly dangerous during the “twilight” period – a transitional phase where conflict is more likely as powers vie for advantage. In such a period, miscalculations stemming from imprecise understanding could easily spark a war.¹⁹ Therefore, the ideological goals behind America's current strategy—strategic competition—introduce inherent points of friction that heighten these risks.

What Are America's Goals in Strategic Competition?

Maintain the Rules-Based International Order

In the context of strategic competition, the United States aims to maintain the rules-based international order that has benefited America and its allies since the end of World War II. The current U.S. national security strategy emphasizes that this international order, as defined and protected by the United States, provides stability and prosperity not only for the United States but for all nations. It states:

Our goal is clear – we want a free, open, prosperous, and secure international order. We seek an order that is free in that it allows people to enjoy their basic, universal rights and freedoms. It is open in that it provides all nations

¹⁷ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017). Authors like Hal Brands, Eliot Cohen, Donald Kagan, Robert Kagan, Paul Kennedy, Walter Russell Mead, and Donald Stoker have used or alluded to the status quo versus rising power construct in their scholarship.

¹⁸ Donald Kagan, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1995), 1-5.

¹⁹ Hal Brands, *The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us About Great-Power Rivalry Today* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022), 1-9.

that sign up to these principles an opportunity to participate in, and have a role in shaping, the rules. It is prosperous in that it empowers all nations to continually raise the standard of living for their citizens. And secure, in that it is free from aggression, coercion and intimidation.²⁰

This international order has provided significant advantages for the United States, its allies, and partners over the past 80 years. However, a comparison of the Obama and Biden administrations' strategies reveals how strategic competition has shifted the focus and goals of American diplomacy, steering the U.S. inward. In Obama's strategy, the emphasis was evident in the title: "International Order,"²¹ reflecting a broad commitment to global stability. In contrast, Biden's strategy, with its title "Using Diplomacy to Build the Strongest Possible Coalitions," reflects a different focus and priority. While the current strategy still lists the international order as a vital interest, its approach centers on building coalitions and relationships to sustain the rules-based international order rather than maintaining the order itself as the primary goal.²² Again, this distinction is striking; two presidents with ostensibly similar philosophical approaches have prioritized American diplomacy in very different ways. This shift reflects a broader cognitive transition from the philosophies that shaped the post-Cold War era to strategic competition as the central organizing concept for national security today. This transformation in diplomatic focus is significant. U.S. diplomacy and the global order rely on American military and economic power, which are now on relative decline compared to China's rising influence and Russia's disruptive actions.²³ These shifts in state priorities and actions align with the dynamics described in the Thucydides Trap paradigm.

Sustaining U.S. Economic Primacy Through Economic Resiliency

The American economy remains the largest and most powerful in the world, representing the nation's greatest strength. However, U.S. strategic goals related to economic capabilities and capacity have shifted with the transition to strategic competition. While Trump's "America First" philosophy marked a significant change in economic focus, this shift is best illustrated in the differences between the Obama and Biden strategies – two Democratic presidents who previously served closely together as President and Vice President. While the Obama strategy was the first to hint at strategic competition, its economic priorities centered on global trade aligned with liberal democratic values and the maintenance of a free global economy supported by the rules-based international order.²⁴ In contrast, Biden's strategy for economic prosperity bears more resemblance to

²⁰ Biden, *National Security Strategy*, 10-11.

²¹ Obama, *National Security Strategy*, 23.

²² Biden, *National Security Strategy*, 16.

²³ Christopher Preble, "A Credible Grand Strategy: The Urgent Need to Set Priorities," Stimson Report (Washington, D.C.: The Stimson Center, January 2024), 5, www.stimson.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Grand-Strategy-Report-WEB.pdf.

²⁴ Obama, *National Security Strategy*, 15.

Trump's approach than to Obama's. It focuses on strengthening "national power" by enhancing domestic economic capabilities, such as workforce, technological innovation, and manufacturing, to ensure American security through economic resilience.²⁵ This shift is further reflected in the U.S. Department of Commerce's current strategy, which centers on three key principles – innovation, equity, and resilience. Its five main goals predominantly focus on strengthening the U.S. economy rather than promoting global economic integration.²⁶ This is a change that illustrates the United States' new focus on strategic competition. It represents a departure from the post-Cold War belief that integrating rising powers like China into a global economy would eventually transform them into liberal democracies, compliant with the international order as the United States envisions it.

Preserving U.S. Primacy

The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) was the first strategic document to explicitly use the term "strategic competition" and designate it as the "primary concern" of the United States and, by extension, the U.S. military. This marked a significant shift for the Department of Defense (DoD) from strategies focused on combating terrorism and regional adversaries like Iran and North Korea to a clear recognition that the United States was in competition with such powers as Russia and China. Reflecting its strategic culture, the U.S. military invested considerable time and effort in defining "strategic competition." After its introduction in the 2018 NDS, the DoD released its *Joint Concept for Competing* in 2023, defining strategic competition as "a persistent and long-term struggle that occurs between two or more adversaries seeking to pursue incompatible interests without necessarily engaging in armed conflict with each other."²⁷ Notably, the military remains the only department to formally define strategic competition and incorporate it into its strategy and planning. Other departments—such as those responsible for diplomacy, development, and commerce—do not use the term despite its role as the organizing construct for the national security strategy. This raises a critical question: How can the United States effectively coordinate and

²⁵ Biden, *National Security Strategy*, 14-15.

²⁶ See Gina Raimondo, U.S. Secretary of Commerce, "Innovation, Equity, and Resilience: Strengthening American Competitiveness in the 21st Century," U.S. Department of Commerce Strategic Plan 2022-2026 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, 2022), www.commerce.gov/sites/default/files/2022-03/DOC-Strategic-Plan-2022%E2%80%932026.pdf.

²⁷ "Joint Concept for Competing," Joint Chiefs of Staff, February 10, 2023, <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/23698400/20230213-joint-concept-for-competing-signed.pdf>, iii; "Pentagon's Joint Concept for Competing," U.S. Naval Institute, March 9, 2023, <https://news.usni.org/2023/03/09/pentagons-joint-concept-for-competing>; Mark Pomerleau, "Pentagon Publishes New 'Joint Concept for Competing,' Warning That Adversaries Aim to 'Win Without Fighting,'" *DefenseScoop*, March 7, 2023, <https://defensescoop.com/2023/03/07/pentagon-publishes-new-joint-concept-for-competing-warning-that-adversaries-aim-to-win-without-fighting/>.

utilize its elements of national power if different departments do not share a common understanding of this key concept?

The primary internal challenge to U.S. military power in strategic competition lies in setting priorities. As outlined earlier, since the end of the Cold War, U.S. primacy and the absence of true competitors allowed the United States to engage in conflicts across the globe, from the Balkans to the Middle East to the Philippines. Following the events of 9/11, the United States maintained global military engagements while committing most of its military force to the prolonged conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, the U.S. military capabilities that provided advantages during and after the Cold War—such as force deployment, global posture, and advanced technology—are now being challenged or denied by adversaries like China, Russia, and regional malign actors such as Iran and North Korea. China and Russia, recognizing America’s distractions, have spent years developing military capabilities and strategic doctrines specifically designed to undermine U.S. strengths and prevent the effective use of its military power.²⁸ This legacy of unchallenged primacy, coupled with competitors’ efforts to neutralize U.S. military advantages, presents a significant dilemma. The U.S. military is transitioning from a posture where it acts with near impunity and overwhelming strength anywhere in the world to one where it must navigate competition with adversaries under the threshold of war, particularly in contested spaces and global commons.

America’s View of Its Competitors

As previously discussed, the United States has framed strategic competition as a renewal of ideological rivalry and a struggle between democracy and authoritarianism. It explicitly identifies China as the primary threat, with Russia—and, to a lesser extent, regional actors like Iran and North Korea—considered “acute” threats that require careful balancing. According to the United States, allowing these states to achieve their strategic objectives and gain advantages would undermine the liberal democratic international order, posing an existential threat to the values and stability upheld by the United States and its allies.²⁹

Has Anything Changed? And Why Does It Matter?

Since strategic competition became the primary security construct in American strategy, the overarching goals and interests have remained consistent. First and foremost, American strategies have long regarded U.S. primacy as critical to both national and global stability and prosperity. The key change, however, has been the explicit identification of China as the “pacing” threat, i.e., the rising power. This status quo versus rising power dynamic is clearly evident and central to the Thucydides Trap narrative that underpins American strategy.

²⁸ Congressional Research Service, *Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense*.

²⁹ Established in the President’s introduction; Biden, *National Security Strategy*, 2-3.

China: the “Pacing” Threat

China represents the United States’ primary concern in strategic competition and is the main driver behind the shift in the American strategic approach.³⁰ As already outlined, after the Cold War, U.S. strategy was based on the assumption that China would reform, transitioning towards a more democratic government and aligning its behavior with global norms as it benefited from growing economic, diplomatic, and cultural ties with the United States and the global West. Instead, China leveraged these opportunities to do the opposite: the Chinese Communist Party consolidated its autocratic regime while simultaneously fueling its economic growth and expanding its military power.³¹

As the primary competitor, China occupies a central place in American strategic thought. The strategies of the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations all identify China as the “pacing” threat – a new term indicating that U.S. competitive actions must be able to match or surpass China’s actions. However, the term “pacing” is problematic, as it connotes the idea of a linear competition between powers, akin to a race where the status quo seeks to prevent the rise of its competitor. This perspective is inherently American and overlooks the asymmetric actions and varied approaches that nations often employ within the broader international relations system.³²

These conditions make the Thucydides Trap paradigm a significant dilemma for American leaders. As discussed earlier, this competition between a status quo power and a rising challenger creates heightened tension and increases the potential for miscalculation. Additionally, the actions of allies or hedging states could inadvertently draw either country into conflict. Ironically, by explicitly designating China as the clear threat and framing strategic competition as an end in itself with respect to China, the United States increases the risk of conflict despite its strategy aiming to avoid it.³³

Russia’s Role as Spoiler

U.S. strategic documents state that Russia threatens international stability and emphasize that American allies and partners, who uphold faith in international agreements like the NATO alliance, are the means to address this “immediate

³⁰ Winkler, “Strategic Competition and US-China Relations,” 345.

³¹ Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, “The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 13, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-02-13/china-reckoning>.

³² Richard Ned Lebow, “Reason, Cause, and Cultural Arrogance,” *E-International Relations*, April 11, 2023, <https://www.e-ir.info/2023/04/11/reason-cause-and-cultural-arrogance/>. Lebow presents an interesting argument that international relations theory are based on Western reason and concepts and therefore do not address approaches from other cultures. This idea is often discussed in military strategic discussions, but this was the first time I had seen the potentially intellectual unpinning versus platitudes that other cultures are “different.”

³³ Biden, *National Security Strategy*, 24-25.

and persistent threat.”³⁴ While successive American strategies have identified China as the primary threat, Russia continues to garner significant attention due to the war in Ukraine, its interventions in “near abroad,” and its persistent use of political warfare—such as cyber-attacks and disinformation—to destabilize adversaries. Notably, the Biden administration’s strategy highlights the importance of “out-competing China and constraining Russia.”³⁵ While American leaders prioritize competition with China, they are continually forced to address the immediate threats posed by Russian actions, which are more blatant violations of the international order and acutely threaten allies and partners in Europe. This forces a diversion of resources, personnel, and effort that the U.S. government would prefer to direct toward countering China. This prioritization challenge was highlighted in the section on military means. For example, the current American strategy aims to “integrate our alliances in the Indo-Pacific and Europe.” The focus of this section is on how one region affects the other. However, it dedicates only one sentence to the role of Indo-Pacific allies in Europe against Russian aggression, while the remaining examples emphasize European allies and partners in Africa and South America helping to counter Chinese actions, particularly in the Taiwan Strait. In the context of the Thucydides Trap paradigm, Russia represents an acute threat that creates dilemmas for both the United States and China. It remains to be seen whether the American approach to strategic competition, with its emphasis on China, will effectively address the distinct threat that Russia poses to the rules-based international order.

How does America Compete?

The United States competes using three main capabilities: its networks of alliances and relationships, its economy, and its military. The current strategy reiterates these capabilities under the heading “Investing in Our Strength.” However, the Biden administration’s national strategy is not the first strategic document to highlight these critical means. American competitiveness lies in its commitment to international liberal institutions that promote democratic values, open economies, and conflict resolution through arbitration. In the context of strategic competition, however, these commitments may be viewed as luxuries, given that U.S. military power, coupled with economic might, has supported these concepts since the end of World War II. The United States’ ability to sustain these commitments is at the heart of its competition with China and Russia.

American Primacy – a Blessing and a Curse

The U.S. role in the Cold War and the strategic confusion that followed its end have created challenges for American focus. The “return” to strategic competition has helped the United States articulate threats to its primacy, but its strate-

³⁴ Biden, *National Security Strategy*, 17, 25-26.

³⁵ Biden, *National Security Strategy*, 23.

gic approach over the last forty years has fostered an expectation—both domestically and abroad—that America will respond to all threats, from regional revisionist powers like Iran and North Korea to transnational issues such as human rights, climate change, extremism, and food insecurity.³⁶

The Biden National Security Strategy asserts that the United States must and will respond, but it also hedges, viewing these issues as areas where even competitors can agree and cooperate.³⁷ In contrast, the Trump National Security Strategy argued that engaging and including rivals undermines American strategy and clearly misinterprets our adversaries' intentions. The Trump strategy made it clear that while the United States must engage its rivals, it should do so with the understanding that everything is part of that rivalry.³⁸ This difference represents a fault line in how different parts of the American polity view strategy and foreign policy, revealing a weakness in the U.S. approach to strategic competition.

Also, allies and partners represent both an opportunity and a challenge for the United States. Washington views its alliances and agreements, such as NATO, as key strategic advantages. American military strength, force projection capabilities, advanced technology, and economic power underpin these relationships, creating a coalition of like-minded states that acts as a powerful deterrent and counterbalance to the rising influence of China and the disruptive goals of Russia, Iran, and North Korea.³⁹ However, maintaining these alliances also introduces challenges. As noted earlier, the U.S.'s inconsistent strategic approach prior to embracing strategic competition created expectations that the United States would respond to any crisis, regardless of its strategic importance. Domestically, this has rekindled more traditional American skepticism toward foreign entanglements and may lead to a new prioritization framework, as foreshadowed by the Trump strategy. The Thucydides Trap paradigm predicts that the United States is more likely to react to crises for allies, no matter the importance to American priorities, driven by the perception that losing an ally or partner is more consequential than spending resources on lower-priority issues.⁴⁰ Balancing these commitments presents one of the Thucydides fault lines, where miscalculation is more likely.

Conclusion

The use of strategic competition in U.S. national strategies reflects a pivotal recognition of the evolving global landscape, particularly the threats posed by

³⁶ Stephen Wertheim, "Why America Can't Have It All: Washington Must Choose Between Primacy and Prioritizing," *Foreign Affairs*, February 14, 2024, www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/why-america-cant-have-it-all.

³⁷ Biden, *National Security Strategy*, 6.

³⁸ Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 3.

³⁹ Biden, *National Security Strategy*, 16-19.

⁴⁰ Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*

China, Russia, and other revanchist states. Emerging from the post-Cold War era, the United States enjoyed a period of unchallenged supremacy, buoyed by optimistic expectations of a harmonious, liberal world order. However, the realities of geopolitics have proven far more complex, with rising powers like China and resurgent actors like Russia fundamentally challenging this narrative. The term “strategic competition” encapsulates the imperative for the United States to reassess its approach, acknowledging the multifaceted nature of contemporary threats and the need to adapt to a more dynamic and contested environment. Crucially, this paradigm underscores the importance of maintaining American primacy in shaping the international order, recognizing both the opportunities and challenges posed by allies and adversaries alike. However, framing strategic competition as an end in itself risks reinforcing constructs like the Thucydides Trap, potentially increasing the likelihood of conflict and miscalculation.

As the United States navigates this new era of competition, it must strategically leverage diplomacy, economic strength, and military capabilities in concert with its network of allies to safeguard its interests and uphold the principles of a free, open, and secure international order. Failure to do so risks not only the erosion of American leadership but also the destabilization of the global landscape. This underscores the critical importance of strategic foresight and resilience in addressing evolving challenges.

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About the Author

Matt Neumeyer is a faculty member and the Chair of the Strategic Security Studies Department at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. The views expressed in this article are his own and do not reflect those of the Marshall Center, the U.S. Army, or the U.S. Department of Defense.

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