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Strategic Competition and Foreign Policy: What is “Political Warfare”?

In recent years, scholars have formed a consensus around the notion that the United States has reentered an international strategic competition with other great powers, notably Russia and China. This great power competition has political, economic and military dimensions, with potentially far-reaching implications for U.S. foreign and national security policy.

Background

Most observers of contemporary international security trends contend that the United States and its allies are entering an era of unprecedented— and dangerous— strategic complexity. In particular, the 2014 Russian invasion of the Crimean peninsula and subsequent proxy war in eastern Ukraine was arguably a watershed moment in international security, as it awakened dormant concerns about an aggressive and revanchist Russia. Months before Russia’s Crimea intervention, China began a territorial expansion as well, building artificial islands on disputed features in the South China Sea which it later turned into military outposts.

Complicating matters some states are collaborating with non-state proxies (including, but not limited to, militias, criminal networks, corporations and hackers) and deliberately blurring the lines between “conventional” and irregular conflict. Some states are also sowing confusion as to what constitutes “civilian” versus “military” activities. Recent events involving China and Russia have raised a number of questions that highlight this complexity:

- Are sales of Chinese multinational Huawei’s 5G networks around the world— including to key U.S. allies— a commercial undertaking or a national security challenge? What is an appropriate U.S. response?
- Are infrastructure investments underwritten by China as part of its “Belt and Road” Initiative (BRI) about improving Chinese access to foreign markets, or is it a de facto way to establish a global presence that could be utilized for security and defense purposes— or both?
- Is Russian production and dissemination of media with pro-Moscow narratives to Russian minority groups in neighboring countries routine messaging, or is it designed to destabilize NATO countries?
- Is Russian interference in U.S. and European elections in 2016, as described by the intelligence community, a national security threat?
- Some European and Commonwealth countries that have maintained strong economic and political relationship

with the United States are becoming increasingly economically dependent on China. At what point does this interdependence, potentially underpinned by greater reliance on China-led economic institutions, alter the security calculus of U.S. Allies and partners?

Altogether, these events underscore to many observers that the United States must be prepared to compete with other powers— powers that are willing to employ both military and nonmilitary means to accomplish their objectives and potentially reshape the world order.

Strategic Competition and the 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy

In response, the Trump Administration has framed the emerging global geopolitical landscape as one characterized by strategic competition. The 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) notes:

China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. They are determined to make economies less free and less fair, to grow their militaries, and to control information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence... [these challenges] **are fundamentally contests between those who value human dignity and freedom and those who oppress individuals and enforce uniformity** (page 2, emphasis added).

In other words, these global geopolitical friction points are undergirded by a common theme: adversaries are questioning— if not outright rejecting— the post-World War II liberal international order that the United States and its allies constructed in the late 1940s. Moreover, the contests the NSS is framing appear to have significant geopolitical dimensions in addition to its moral ones. This is because to U.S. competitors, advancing human dignity and freedom are means by which the United States retains its dominant standing in the world. Both China and Russia for example, according to *Understanding the Current International Order* (a 2016 RAND report), “resent key elements of the U.S. conception of postwar order, such as promotion of liberal values ... viewing them as tools used by the United States to sustain its hegemony.”

China appears to be using its wealth to assert security interests in the Pacific, deepen and formalize the region’s economic integration through efforts such as BRI, and assert larger influence at international institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. These institutions, however, are rooted in a

shared sets of values and norms, and it remains uncertain if China’s efforts align with these common values or whether China is instead seeking to create a new international consensus.

Further, U.S. competitors are not just challenging American promulgation of values; they are challenging the arguments for continued United States leadership of the global system itself. Critics contend that the United States has overly militarized its foreign policy; that it has unnecessarily used force in the pursuit of often-unachievable strategic objectives; and that its economic policies have led to global financial crises. In Munich in 2007, for example, coming on the heels of the U.S. “surge” in Iraq and shortly before the 2008 global financial crisis, Russian President Vladimir Putin essentially argued that U.S. “unipolar” management of the global system has been both immoral and incompetent. Subsequent Russian activities in the Ukraine have led some to view Putin’s critique with skepticism. Still, U.S. leadership of the extant world order is being challenged on moral, geopolitical and competency grounds, suggesting to some observers that the U.S. should account for, and better synchronize, these dimensions of statecraft and strategy into the future.

Political Warfare?

“Political Warfare” is a term that has recently been reinvigorated by scholars of strategy; it describes the synchronized use of any aspect of national power short of overt conventional warfare— such as intelligence assets, alliance building, financial tools, diplomatic relations, to name a few— to achieve state objectives. It was coined in the late 1940s by George F. Kennan, a key architect of U.S. strategy during the Cold War, as the United States began to come to grips with the challenge presented by the Soviet Union (USSR). As he wrote in his 1948 State Department memorandum *Organizing Political Warfare*:

We have been handicapped...by a popular attachment to the concept of a basic difference between peace and war... and by a reluctance to recognize the realities of international relations—the perpetual rhythm of struggle, in and out of war... Political warfare is the logical application of Clausewitz’s doctrine in time of peace. **In broadest definition, political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation’s command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives.** Such operations...range from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures, and ‘white’ propaganda to such covert operations as clandestine support of ‘friendly’ foreign elements, ‘black’ psychological warfare and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states.

Implications for Today?

In the United States, the military dimensions of this competition garner significant attention and resources. Yet if political warfare is an adequate lens through which to view this strategic competition, the nonmilitary aspects of the competition might prove equally if not more important.

Is the United States investing in the right tools and capabilities to counter political warfare?

Economic Statecraft?

Policymakers generally consider national security and the requirement for trade and investment relations as interrelated strategic priorities. The United States has traditionally used its leadership position to pursue increased economic engagement to bring emerging powers into the rules-based international system. Yet concerns over growing economic challenges, including the unequal distribution of gains from globalization, have led some countries to embrace populist political views, economic nationalism, and to pursue mercantilist policies. As such, a number of countries, including the United Kingdom, Italy and the United States, appear to be pursuing increasingly protectionist trade and financial policies as they face a more competitive and multipolar global economy.

The Trump Administration has promoted a U.S. foreign policy that seeks to better integrate economic relationships with national security, defense, and foreign policy objectives. In so doing, some experts contend that the Administration is questioning general consensus about the relative benefits of the global economic order and the rules-based international system, and in so doing, the appropriate role of the state in international economic policymaking. For example, the Trump Administration has used certain trade laws to place increased tariffs on the imports of strategic security partners and other trading partners to address perceived threats to national security. At the same time, it has opened up new bilateral trade negotiations and sought to renegotiate other trade agreements.

Diplomatic Tools?

For FY2018 and FY2019, the Trump Administration has requested that the International Affairs budget, which supports U.S. embassies and diplomatic activities as well as foreign assistance, be cut by more than 20% from FY2017 funding levels. While some defend proposed cuts to the State Department’s budget on management and inefficiency grounds, in the context of political warfare, the reductions to the international affairs budget raise two key questions: whether the budgets and associated programs are sufficient to meet today’s challenges, and whether new programming and capabilities are needed to meet the emerging strategic challenges.

CRS Products

CRS Report R45142, *Information Warfare: Issues for Congress*, by Catherine A. Theohary

CRS Report R44891, *U.S. Role in the World: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O’Rourke and Michael Moodie

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