

THE DISPUTE REVIVAL FOR THE SUPERPOWER STATUS

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The resurgence of Russia and the rapid development of China have created a new period of rivalry for superpower status. The debates of the main global actors on the relaunch of competition have led to a review of the importance of the great strategy and geopolitics as a starting point for analysing the defence funding level, strategy, plans, and programmes.

The post-Cold War period of international relations, which began in the early 1990s and generally was referred to as the unipolar stage, with the United States as the sole superpower, passed into a new phase, marked by events with global consequences from 2006 until 2014. The international environment has shifted to a fundamentally different situation characterised by a resurgence of dispute by China and Russia and the challenges of these two countries to the specific mechanisms of the US-led international order, which operated even after the end of the First World War.

Counter-terrorism and other military operations in the Middle East, which have been the focus of discussions on military-specific issues following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, continue, but now are a less dominant element in US military concerns, other areas related to China and Russia becoming now relevant.

Keywords: competition; bipolar world; world superpower; international order; state actor;

INTRODUCTION

Strategic trends in recent years illustrate the accumulation of a substantial potential to reshape relations between actors with global interests, with direct effects on the stability and predictability of the international system, and the revival of global strategic competition confirms the transition to a new security paradigm (*The country's National Defence Strategy, 2020, p. 17*). Today's global liberal democratic order faces two challenges. The first is radical Islam – and it is the lesser of the two challenges. Although the proponents of radical Islam find liberal democracy repugnant, and the movement is often described as the new fascist threat, the societies from which it arises are generally poor and stagnant. They represent no viable alternative to modernity and pose no significant military threat to the developed world. It is mainly the potential use of weapons of mass destruction – particularly by non-state actors – that makes militant Islam a menace. The second, more significant, challenge emanates from the rise of nondemocratic great powers: The old Cold War rivals of the West – China and Russia, now operating under authoritarian capitalist, rather than communist, regimes. Authoritarian capitalist great powers played a leading role in the international system up until 1945.

The United States has a strong interest in precluding the emergence of another bipolar world – as in the Cold War – or a world of many great powers, as existed before the two world wars. Multipolarity led to two world wars and bipolarity resulted in a protracted worldwide struggle with the risk of nuclear annihilation. To avoid a return to such circumstances, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney ultimately agreed that the USA objective must be to prevent a hostile power to dominate a “critical region”, which would give it the resources, industrial capabilities and population to pose a global challenge. This insight has guided US defence policy throughout the post-Cold War era (Khalilzad, 2016).

The Cold War era, which is generally viewed as lasting from the late 1940s until the late 1980s or early 1990s, was generally viewed as a strongly bipolar situation featuring two superpowers – the United States and the Soviet Union – engaged in a political, ideological, and military competition for influence across multiple geographic regions. The military component of that competition was often most

acutely visible in Europe, where the US-led NATO Alliance and the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact alliance faced off against one another with large numbers of conventional forces and theatre nuclear weapons, backed by longer-ranged strategic nuclear weapons.

The post-Cold War era is generally viewed as having begun in the late 1980s and early 1990s, following the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, the disbanding of the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact military alliance in March 1991, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union into Russia and the former Soviet republics in December 1991, which were key events marking the ending of the Cold War. Compared to the Cold War, the post-Cold War era generally featured reduced levels of overt political, ideological, and military competition among major states.

The post-Cold War era is generally viewed as having tended toward a unipolar situation, with the United States as the world's sole superpower. Neither Russia, China, nor any other country was viewed as posing a significant challenge to either the United States' status as the world's sole superpower or the US-led international order. Following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the post-Cold War era was additionally characterised by a strong focus (at least from a US perspective) on countering transnational terrorist organisations that had emerged as significant non-state actors, particularly Al Qaeda.

Many observers have concluded that the post-Cold War era began to fade in 2006-2008, and that by 2014 – following Chinese actions in the South and East China Seas and Russia's seizure and annexation of Crimea – when the international environment shifted to a fundamentally different situation of renewed competition for superpower status with China and Russia and due to the challenges of these two countries and other actors to elements of the US-led international order that has operated since World War II (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 29-42). Three main sets of challengers – the revisionist powers of China and Russia, the rogue states of Iran and North Korea, and transnational threat organisations, particularly jihadist terrorist groups – are actively competing against the United States and their allies and partners. Although differing in nature and magnitude, these rivals compete across political, economic, and military arenas, and use technology and information to accelerate these contests in order to shift regional balances of power in their favour. These are fundamentally political contests between those who favour repressive systems and those who favour free societies.

John Mearsheimer, scientist and professor of political science at the University of Chicago, defines a great power as a state, having sufficient military assets to put

up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the dominant power – that would be the United States of America – and possessing a nuclear deterrent that could survive a first strike against it (Work, 2015, p. 3).

China and Russia want to shape a world antithetical to the US values and interests. China seeks to displace the USA in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favour. Russia seeks to restore its great power status and establish spheres of influence near its borders (Payne et al., 2017, pp. 18-33). The intentions of both nations are not necessarily fixed. The USA stands ready to cooperate across areas of mutual interest with both countries. In addition, after being dismissed as a phenomenon of an earlier century, great power competition returned, China and Russia began to reassert their influence regionally and globally. Today, they are fielding military capabilities designed to deny America access in times of crisis and to contest the ability to operate freely in critical commercial zones during peacetime. In short, they are contesting the geopolitical advantages and trying to change the international order in their favour (National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 2017, pp. 2-3, 25-27).

Today, the United States of America are emerging from a period of strategic atrophy, aware that their competitive military advantage has been eroding. We are facing increased global disorder, characterised by decline in the long-standing rules-based international order – creating a security environment more complex and volatile than any we have experienced in recent memory (Krauthammer, 2014). Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in US national security.

China is a strategic competitor using predatory economics to intimidate its neighbours while militarising features in the South China Sea. Russia has violated the borders of nearby nations and pursues veto power over the economic, diplomatic, and security decisions of its neighbours (Dibb, 2016, p. 8). As well, North Korea's outlaw actions and reckless rhetoric continue despite the United Nation's censure and sanctions. Iran continues to sow violence and remains the most significant challenge to Middle East stability. Despite the defeat of ISIS's physical caliphate, threats to stability remain as terrorist groups with long reach continue to murder the innocent and threaten peace more broadly (National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, 2018, pp. 1-4).

Challenges to the US military advantage represent another shift in the global security environment. For decades the United States of America has enjoyed

uncontested or dominant superiority in every operating domain. In general, they could deploy their forces whenever they wanted, assemble them where they wanted, and operate as they wished. Today, every field is challenged – air, land, naval, space and cyberspace.

The security environment is also affected by the rapid technological advancement and the changing character of war. States are the principal actors on the global stage, but non-state actors also threaten the security environment with increasingly sophisticated capabilities.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF DISPUTE REVIVAL

In foreign policy discussions, terms like *unipolar*, *bipolar*, *tripolar*, and *multipolar* are sometimes used to refer to the number of top-tier world powers whose actions tend to characterise or give structure to a given historical period's international security situation. The Cold War that lasted from the late 1940s to the late 1980s or early 1990s is usually described as a bipolar situation featuring a competition between two superpowers (the United States and the Soviet Union) and their allies. The post-Cold War era, which followed the Cold War, is sometimes described as the unipolar moment, with the United States being the unipolar power, meaning the world's sole superpower. As mentioned, observers have concluded that in recent years, there has been a shift from the post-Cold War era to a new international security situation characterised by renewed great power competition between the United States, China, and Russia, leading observers to refer to the new situation as a tripolar or multipolar world. Observers who might list additional countries (or groups of countries, such as the European Union) as additional top-tier world powers, along with the United States of America, China, and Russia, might also use the term multipolar.

The term *regional hegemon* generally refers to a country so powerful relative to the other countries in its region that it can dominate the affairs of that region and compel other countries in that region to support (or at least not oppose) the hegemon's key policy goals. The United States of America is generally considered to have established itself in the 19th century as the hegemon of the Western Hemisphere.

Many observers view the new international security environment not as a bipolar situation, like during the Cold War, or as a unipolar situation, like the post-Cold War era, but as a situation largely characterised by renewed competition among the three great world powers – the United States of America, China and Russia. The key

features of the current situation of renewal of competition for superpower status include, but are not necessarily limited to, the following:

- the use by Russia and China of new forms of aggressive or assertive military, paramilitary, information, and cyber operations – sometimes called hybrid warfare, grey-zone operations, ambiguous warfare, among other terms, in the case of Russia’s actions, and salami-slicing tactics (the process of gradually reducing the size by a series of small incremental steps) or grey-zone warfare, among other terms, in the case of China’s actions;
- renewed ideological competition, this time against 21st-century forms of authoritarianism and illiberal democracy in Russia, China, and other countries;
- the promotion by China and Russia through their state-controlled media of nationalistic historical narratives emphasising assertions of prior humiliation or victimisation by Western powers, and the use of those narratives to support revanchist or irredentist foreign policy aims;
- challenges by Russia and China to key elements of the US-led international order, including the principle that force or threat of force should not be used as a routine or first-resort measure for settling disputes between countries, and the principle of freedom of the seas (i.e., that the world’s oceans are to be treated as an international commons) (Götz et al., 2019);
- continued regional security challenges from countries such as Iran and North Korea;
- a continued focus – at least from a US perspective – on countering transnational terrorist organisations that have emerged as significant non-state actors – including the Islamic State organisation, among other groups -; and
- weak or failed states, and resulting weakly governed, unpredictable or ungoverned areas that can contribute to the emergence of (or serve as base areas or sanctuaries for) non-state actors, and become potential locations of intervention by stronger states, including major powers.

Evidence of the dispute revival for superpower status. The sharpest single marker of the shift in the international security environment to a situation of renewed great power competition arguably was Russia’s seizure and annexation of Crimea in March 2014, which represented the first forcible seizure and annexation of one country’s territory by another country in Europe since World War II. Other markers of the shift – such as Russia’s actions in eastern Ukraine and elsewhere in Eastern

Europe since March 2014, China's economic growth and military modernisation, as well as, China's actions in the South and East China Seas over the last several years – have been more gradual and cumulative.

The beginnings of the shift from the post-Cold War era to renewed great power competition can be traced to the period 2006-2008:

- Freedom House's annual report on freedom in the world for 2019 states, by the organisation's own analysis, that countries experiencing net declines in freedom have outnumbered countries experiencing net increases in freedom for 13 years in a row, starting in 2006 (Freedom House, 2019, p. 5);
- in February 2007, in a speech at an international security conference in Munich, Russian President Vladimir Putin criticised and rejected the concept of a unipolar power, predicted a shift to multipolar order, and affirmed an active Russian role in international affairs. Some observers view the speech in retrospect as prefiguring a more assertive and competitive Russian foreign policy (Rumer, pp. 10-12);
- in 2008, Russia invaded and occupied part of the former Soviet Republic of Georgia without provoking a strong cost-imposing response from the USA and its allies (Rice, 2018). Also in that year, the financial crisis and resulting deep recessions in the USA and Europe, combined with China's ability to weather that crisis and its successful staging of the 2008 Summer Olympics, are seen by observers as having contributed to a perception in China of the United States of America as a declining power, and to a Chinese sense of self-confidence or triumphalism (Broderick, 2015, pp. 2, 4, 6-10). China's assertive actions in the South and East China Seas can be viewed as having begun or accelerated soon thereafter.

Other observers trace the roots of the shift to renewed great power competition further, to years prior to 2006-2008 (Blustein, 2019).

Comparison to past international security environments. Some observers seek to better understand the current situation of renewed competition for superpower status in part by comparing it to past international security environments. Each international security environment features its own combination of major actors, dimensions of competition and cooperation among those actors, and military and other technologies available to them. A given international security environment can have some similarities to previous ones, but it will also have differences, including, potentially, one or more features not present in any other international security environment. In the early years of a new international security environment,

some of its features may be unclear, in dispute, not yet apparent, or subject to evolution. In attempting to understand an international security environment, comparisons to other ones are potentially helpful in identifying avenues of investigation. If applied too rigidly, however, such comparisons can act as intellectual straightjackets, making it more difficult to achieve a full understanding of a given international security environment's characteristic features, particularly those that differentiate it from previous ones.

Some observers have stated that the world has entered a new Cold War (or Cold War II or 2.0). That term may have some utility in referring specifically to US-Russian or US-Chinese relations, because the era of renewed great power competition features rivalry and tension with Russia and China. Considered more broadly, however, the Cold War was a bipolar situation with the United States of America and Russia, while the era of renewed great power competition is a situation that also includes China as a major competing power (Gareis, 2019). The bipolarity of the Cold War, moreover, was reinforced by the opposing NATO and Warsaw Pact alliances, whereas in contrast, Russia and China today do not lead an equivalent of the Warsaw Pact. And while terrorists were a concern during the Cold War, the USA focused on countering transnational terrorist groups but it was not nearly as significant during the Cold War as it has been since 9/11. Other observers, viewing the renewal of great power competition, have drawn comparisons to the multipolar situation that existed in the 19th century and the years prior to World War I. Still others, observing the promotion in China and Russia of nationalistic historical narratives supporting revanchist or irredentist foreign policy aims, have drawn comparisons to the 1930s (Gotz, pp. 135-137).

Those two earlier situations, however, did not feature a strong focus on countering globally significant transnational terrorist groups, and the military and other technologies available then differ vastly from those available today. The current period of renewed great power competition may be similar in some respects to previous situations, but it also differs from previous situations in certain respects, and might be best understood by direct observation and identification of its key features. Observers viewing the international security environment have given it various names, but names using some variation of great power competition or renewed great power competition appear to have become most commonly used in public policy discussion. Other terms that have been used include *competitive world order*, *multipolar era*, *tripolar era*, and *disorderly world (or era)*.

The previous major change in the international security environment – the shift in the late 1980s and early 1990s from the Cold War to the post-Cold War era – prompted a broad reassessment by the DOD and Congress of defence funding levels, strategy, and missions that led to numerous changes in DOD plans and programmes. Many of the mentioned changes were articulated in the 1993 *Bottom-Up Review (BUR)* (Report on the Bottom-Up Review, 1993, pp. 71-107), a reassessment of US defence plans and programmes whose very name conveyed the fundamental nature of the re-examination that had occurred. In general, the BUR reshaped the US military into a force that was smaller than the Cold War US military, and oriented toward a planning scenario being able to conduct two major regional contingencies rather than the Cold War planning scenario of a NATO-Warsaw Pact conflict.

In March 1993, it was initiated a comprehensive review of the US defence strategy, force structure, modernisation, infrastructure, and foundations. It was considered that a department-wide review needed to be conducted “*from the bottom up*” because of the dramatic changes that had occurred in the world as a result of the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. These changes in the international security environment have fundamentally altered America’s security needs. Thus, the underlying premise of the Bottom-Up Review was that it needed to reassess all defence concepts, plans, and programmes from the ground up.

US ROLE IN THE WORLD

While descriptions of the US purpose in the world since the end of World War II vary in their specifics, it can be described in general terms as consisting of four key elements: global leadership; defence and promotion of the liberal international order; defence and promotion of freedom, democracy, and human rights; and prevention of the emergence of regional hegemony in Eurasia (Kagan, 2017, p. 1). The issue is whether the US role in the world is changing, and if so, what implications this might have for the United States of America and the world. This could significantly affect the US policy in areas such as relations with allies and other countries, defence plans and programmes, trade and international finance, foreign assistance, and human rights.

Some observers view the change as an unnecessary retreat from US global leadership and a gratuitous discarding of long-held western values, and judge it to be an unforced error of immense proportions – a needless and self-defeating squandering of something of great value to the United States of America that it had worked to build and maintain for 70 years.

Other observers who assess that there has been a change in the US role in the world in recent years as well as some observers who argue in favour of a more restrained US role in the world view the change in the US role, or at least certain aspects of it, as helpful for responding to changed US and global circumstances and for defending US values and interests, particularly in terms of adjusting the US role to one that is more realistic regarding what the United States of America can accomplish, enhancing deterrence of potential regional aggression by making potential US actions less predictable to potential adversaries, re-establishing respect for national sovereignty as a guidepost for US foreign policy and for organising international affairs, and encouraging US allies and security partners in Eurasia to do more to defend themselves.

A fourth element of the US role in the world since World War II – one that US policymakers do not often state explicitly in public – has been to oppose the emergence of regional hegemonies in Eurasia. This objective reflects a US perspective on geopolitics and grand strategy developed by US strategists and policymakers during and in the years immediately after World War II that incorporates two key judgments:

- first, that given the amount of people, resources, and economic activity in Eurasia, a regional hegemon in Eurasia would represent a concentration of power large enough to be able to threaten vital US interests;
- second, Eurasia is not dependably self-regulating in terms of preventing the emergence of regional hegemonies, meaning that the countries of Eurasia cannot be counted on to be able to prevent, through their own actions, the emergence of regional hegemonies, and may need assistance from one or more countries outside Eurasia to be able to do this dependably (National Defense Strategy of the USA, pp. 1-11).

Preventing the emergence of regional hegemonies in Eurasia is sometimes also referred to as preserving a division of power in Eurasia, or as preventing key regions in Eurasia from coming under the domination of a single power, or as preventing the emergence of a spheres-of-influence world, which could be a consequence of the emergence of one or more regional hegemonies in Eurasia.

US actions that can be viewed as expressions of the US goal of preventing the emergence of regional hegemonies in Eurasia include but are not necessarily limited to the following:

1. US participation in World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War;

2. US alliances and security partnerships, including:
 - a) NATO Alliance, which was established in large part to deter and counter attempts by the Soviet Union (now Russia) to become a regional hegemon in Europe;
 - b) US alliances with countries in East Asia and the Pacific, which were established in large part to deter and counter attempts by the Soviet Union or China to become a regional hegemon in East Asia; and
 - c) US security partnerships with countries in the Persian Gulf region, which were established in large part to deter or counter attempts by Iran or the Soviet Union (now Russia) to become a regional hegemon in that region; and

3. additional US political, diplomatic, and economic actions to contain and oppose the Soviet Union during the Cold War, including the Marshall Plan and subsequent US foreign assistance programmes.

In pursuing the goal of preventing the emergence of regional hegemons in Eurasia, US policymakers have sometimes decided to work with or support nondemocratic regimes that for their own reasons view Russia, China, or Iran as competitors or adversaries. As a consequence, the goal of preventing the emergence of regional hegemons in Asia has sometimes been in tension with defending and promoting freedom, democracy, and human rights.

POTENTIAL IMPACT OF COVID-19 (CORONAVIRUS)

For the first time in the 21st century, the world is facing a pandemic that has affected all states and triggered an economic crisis that will affect the serious power relations between global actors, which will increase the volatility and unpredictability, already accentuated, of the international security environment. A rapidly emerging but potentially very significant issue is the question of whether and how the global COVID-19 pandemic might lead to profoundly transformative and long-lasting changes in both the structure of international politics and the US role in the world in areas such as US global leadership, China and Russia's potential for acting as a global leader, US strategic competition with China and Russia, US relations with allies, and US definitions of US national security.

Some observers argue the COVID-19 pandemic could be a world-changing event with potentially profound and long-lasting implications for the international security environment and the US role in the world. Other observers are more sceptical that the COVID-19 pandemic will have such effects.

Observers who argue the COVID-19 pandemic could be world-changing for the international security environment and the US role in the world have focused on several areas of potential change, including the following, which are listed here separately but overlap in some cases and can interact with one another:

- world order, international institutions, and global governance;
- US global leadership and the US role in the world;
- China and Russia's potential role as a global leader;
- US relations and great power competition with China and Russia, including the use of the COVID-19 pandemic as a theme or tool for conducting ideological competition;
- the relative prevalence of democratic and authoritarian or autocratic forms of government;
- societal tension, reform, transformation, and governmental stability in various countries;
- the world economy, globalisation, and US and China trade policy;
- the characteristics and conduct of conflict;
- allied defence budgets and US alliances, as well as those of Russia and China;
- the cohesion of the European Union;
- the definition of, and budgeting for US national security as well as Russia and China;
- USA, Russia and China defence strategies, defence budgets, and military operations;
- US foreign assistance programmes and international debt relief;
- activities of non-state actors;
- the amount of US, Russia and China attention devoted to ongoing international issues other than the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some observers have focused on how, in their view, the COVID-19 pandemic is demonstrating that the United States of America is maintaining or reasserting its role as a global leader, while other observers suggest that, the COVID-19 pandemic is demonstrating that the United States of America has chosen to withdraw from or is no longer capable of performing that role. The COVID-19 pandemic could influence discussions over the costs and benefits to the USA of acting as a global leader, not only with respect to global health but across a range of issues. Some analysts have focused on how the COVID-19 pandemic may be providing insight into whether China and Russia desire and work to become a global leader on par with (or in the place of) the United States of America, whether China and Russia have a capacity for doing so, and how other countries might view them acting in such a role.

China's transparency, particularly regarding its actions in the early days of its COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, as well as China's so-called donation diplomacy or mask diplomacy – meaning China's actions to send medical supplies and personnel to other countries, and the highlighting of these actions in statements from China's government and state controlled media – have become new elements of an ongoing discussion regarding China's capacity or suitability for acting as a global leader.

This ongoing discussion includes consideration of a range of other issues, including China's actions for implementing its Belt and Road Initiative, China's territorial disputes with other countries, its participation in international organisations, and its technology-development and international lending activities. Some observers have focused on how the COVID-19 pandemic has become a significant element in USA-China relations, and in US great power competition with China and Russia.

For some observers, the COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity for USA-China cooperation on an important international issue of common interest. For other observers, the COVID-19 pandemic is a major new source of dispute and arena of competition between the two countries, and it is causing USA-China relations to harden more fully into a Cold War-like adversarial situation.

Some observers have focused on how the COVID-19 pandemic provides a prominent new factor in the discussion of whether the United States of America should decouple its economy from China's and reduce its dependence on China for key materials and products, including hospital supplies and pharmaceuticals.

Some observers have focused on whether the US and Chinese responses to the COVID-19 pandemic will affect views around the world regarding the relative merits of the US and Chinese forms of government and economic models as potential examples to emulate.

CONCLUSIONS

In recent years, the US-led liberal world order that emerged after the end of the Cold War has been shaken. In many ways, though, what has emerged as the most immediate challenge to the current international order is Russia's increasingly proactive and assertive behaviour.

There is broad agreement among commentators and analysts that Russia seeks to undermine the US-led liberal international order. At the same time, there is considerable disagreement over the nature and extent of the challenge Moscow poses, the underlying drivers of Russian revisionism, and how the West should respond.

It is possible to distinguish between three major perspectives. In brief, the first suggests that Russia is a “*revanchist power*” that seeks to overturn the very foundations of the liberal world order. The second perspective holds that Russia is a “*defensive power*” that works for incremental changes within the existing order. The third perspective contends that Russia is an “*aggressive isolationist*”, meaning that the Putin regime deliberately plays a spoiler role in international affairs to boost its domestic legitimacy. Moscow’s revisionist agenda manifests itself in several ways. First, Russia challenges established rules and norms in the post-Soviet space, including the sanctity of international borders. The takeover of Crimea, in this perspective, was only the latest, and most extreme, example of a much broader pattern of behaviour. Over the course of the past decade, Russia has gone to war with Georgia; repeatedly interfered in the domestic political affairs of neighbouring countries; exerted various forms of economic pressure on states like Ukraine, Moldova, and Lithuania; and expanded its network of military bases in the post-Soviet region. The ultimate goal of these activities is to establish an exclusive sphere of influence on the territory of the former Soviet Union. In other words, the grand ambition is to undo the post-Cold War settlement to re-establish Russia as a dominant power in Eurasia. Second, Russia seeks to exploit the West’s openness and vulnerabilities – information systems, political pluralism, and socio-economic fault lines – to create divisions within the Euro-Atlantic community. Third, Moscow is forging alliances with likeminded authoritarian regimes in countries such as Belarus, Iran, Syria, Venezuela, and, most importantly, China. China and Russia together, represent the core of a new coalition of anti-democratic autocracies challenging the Western-imposed, post-Cold War status quo.

In an international security environment described as one of renewed super power competition, the South China Sea has emerged as an arena of USA-China strategic competition. China’s actions in the South China Sea in recent years – including extensive island-building and base construction activities at sites that it occupies in the Spratly Islands, as well as actions by its maritime forces to assert China’s claims against competing claims by regional neighbours such as the Philippines and Vietnam – have heightened concerns among US observers that China is gaining effective control of the South China Sea, an area of strategic, political, and economic importance to the United States of America and its allies and partners. Actions by China’s maritime forces at the Japan administered Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea are another concern for the USA. Chinese domination of China’s near-seas region – meaning the South China Sea and East China Sea,

along with the Yellow Sea – could substantially affect US strategic, political, and economic interests in the Indo-Pacific region and elsewhere.

Summarising, there are three main sets of challengers – the revisionist powers of China and Russia, the rogue states of Iran and North Korea, and transnational threat organisations, particularly jihadist terrorist groups – that are actively competing against the United States of America and its allies and partners.

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