

Introduction

MASUDA Masayuki



U.S.-China Summit Meeting in Palm Beach, Florida, United States, April 7, 2017 (Reuters/Kyodo)

Strategic Competition

THE TRAJECTORY of the competitive U.S.-China relationship is unlikely to change. This bilateral relationship is often referred to as “strategic competition.” However, a clear academic definition does not necessarily exist for discussing it in the context of Sino-U.S. relations. The two countries have not, since the outset of their so-called strategic competition, shared neither its substance nor its scope with each other. The discussions on U.S.-China strategic competition suggest that it broadly means active rivalry between states that perceive their fundamental interests and values under threat by the opposite party.¹

The concept of strategic competition reemerged as a U.S. narrative.² American perception, approach, and policy toward China underwent structural changes from the latter half of the Barack Obama administration (2009–2017) to the Donald Trump administration (2017–2021).³ The keyword was strategic competition. In December 2017, the Trump administration released the *National Security Strategy* (NSS), which identified China and Russia as revisionist powers challenging the existing international order.⁴ Furthermore, the summary of the *National Defense Strategy* (NDS), unveiled in January 2018, states, “The central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the *reemergence of long-term, strategic competition*” by China and Russia.⁵ (emphasis added)

China was considered the top challenger to the United States.⁶ From the summer of 2018, the Trump administration pursued a comprehensive rivalry approach, employing pressure tactics such as additional tariffs on Chinese exports, regulations on Chinese tech companies, and sanctions over China’s human rights issues. The Joseph Biden administration, which took office in January 2021, reaffirmed in its October 2022 NSS that “We are in the midst of a strategic competition” and declared to “compete responsibly with the People’s Republic of China (PRC).”⁷ On this basis, the administration set out to increase investment in the United States and enhance collaboration with its allies and partners to gain an edge over China in technology, economy, politics, military, intelligence, and global governance. As such, the strategic competition narrative is unequivocally a strategic concept pertaining to the United States’ foreign policy and policy toward China.

Meanwhile, Beijing has not accepted Washington’s narrative of strategic competition.⁸ On the phone with President Biden in July 2022, President Xi Jinping stated, “to approach and define China-U.S. relations in terms of strategic competition and view China as the primary rival and the most serious long-term challenge would be misperceiving China-U.S. relations and misreading China’s development.”⁹ Chinese experts, too, actively debated

the U.S. policy of strategic competition toward China, yet remained cautious about characterizing the bilateral relationship as strategic competition.¹⁰ Accepting Washington’s narrative of strategic competition would inevitably prompt a geopolitical competition between the two countries over the nature of the international order, and this was not necessarily advantageous for Beijing.¹¹

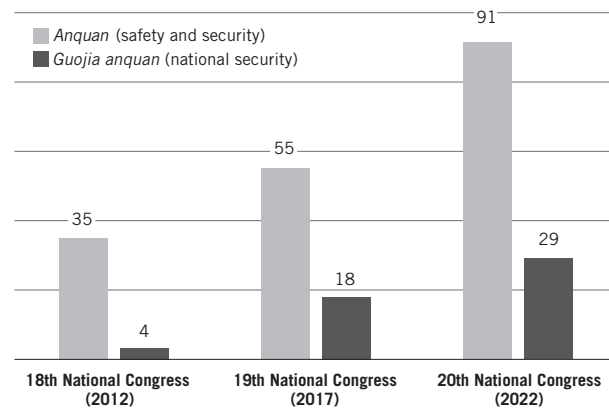
At the same time, Beijing increasingly perceives strategic competition, characterized by comprehensive pressure, as Washington’s fixed policy toward China. From around 2019, Beijing’s strategies and policies began to assume the U.S. policy of strategic competition with China.¹² Its 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) set a new development goal: “the construction of a new development structure with domestic circulation in the lead and the dual domestic and international circulations mutually advancing each other.” According to then vice premier Liu He, the new development goal was established partially “in response to the changes in the complex international environment.”¹³ They included the rise of populism and trade protectionism in the United States that is in a strategic competition with China, as well as the impact of COVID-19.

This led to China’s pessimistic outlook for Sino-U.S. relations. As the strategic competition approach gained traction in U.S. foreign policy, Xi Jinping began to emphasize *anquan* (safety and security) in its economy, trade, science and technology, and other policy areas. In the military domain, there were growing calls for crisis management to prevent U.S.-China competition from escalating into military conflict.¹⁴ Not only that, there were also domestic discussions on adapting to the “new international situation” of strategic competition and on the People’s Liberation Army’s preparations for the “worst-case scenario” in the Taiwan Strait.¹⁵

In the report to the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in October 2022, Xi Jinping repeatedly mentioned *anquan* while expressing a sense of anxiety over the international landscape.¹⁶ In view of the U.S. policy trend to engage in strategic competition with China, Xi noted that “External attempts to suppress and contain China may escalate at any time.” In light of these external circumstances, Xi stated, “We will become more adept at deploying our military forces on a regular basis and in diversified ways, and our military will remain both steadfast and flexible as it carries out its operations. This will enable us to shape our security posture, deter and manage crises and conflicts, and win local wars.”

As the above has shown, both Washington and Beijing increasingly see their security as being threatened. In U.S.-China relations, there exists active rivalry between states that perceive their fundamental interests and values under threat by the opposite party, that is, strategic competition. The notion

Number of mentions of *anquan* (safety and security) in the reports to the CCP National Congress



Source: Masuda Masayuki, “Shu Kinpei ‘ikkyo taisei’ no kikikan: akka suru Chugoku no gaibu kankyo” [Anxiety over Xi Jinping’s Strongman Politics: The Deteriorating External Environment of China], *Toa*, no. 666 (December 2022): 55.

of strategic competition, which reemerged as a policy discourse or strategic concept in the United States, has become relatively fixed as a U.S. approach or policy toward China. Consequently, China’s perception and policies have become more competitive and adversarial toward the United States. In other words, it is necessary to discuss strategic competition not only as a U.S. strategic discourse but also as a U.S.-China interaction or relations discourse.

Great Power Competition

According to Charles Glaser, if a state’s strategy or policy is motivated solely by traditional security, or a desire to protect its territorial integrity, it will not seek expansionist actions so long as the status quo is maintained.¹⁷ In the case of the United States and China, however, their strategic competition is characterized by an underlying security logic that is based on a strong sense of anxiety. This extends to a wide range of areas, including military, trade, advanced technology, governance, and their underpinning values.

For Washington, it means the threat posed by China (and Russia) to the post-Cold War liberal international order. From China’s perspective, U.S. strategic moves pose a challenge to the CCP’s rule and economic development, which gives legitimacy to its rule. Furthermore, the strategic competition has touched on the Taiwan issue. The United States has enhanced

its commitment to the security of Taiwan, viewing it as “an indispensable element in security and prosperity in the international community”—in other words, to maintain the liberal international order.¹⁸ As a result, China increasingly perceives that the status quo vis-à-vis its sovereignty is under threat, along with the principles of the “post-war international order,” such as respecting territorial integrity and non-interference in internal affairs.¹⁹

Many scholars of international relations have debated whether the United States and China are destined for conflict, or if their relationship can be managed peacefully. However, the latter debate on the logic of cooperation has receded, with the security logic dominating the strategies and policies of the two countries. There is now an even greater tendency to frame U.S.-China relations under the competition logic, which has further shown that the U.S.-China rivalry pertains to the nature of the international order.²⁰

Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, U.S.-China and great power relations have not only been shaped by the logic of competition, but have also been increasingly riven with divisions. Russia’s military invasion is nothing short of an act that disrupts the international order in disregard of the principles of international relations. The United States has provided robust support to Ukraine in coordination with the international community, particularly Western countries.²¹ China, on the other hand, has not supported Russia’s military actions but nevertheless continues to maintain strategic alignment with Moscow. As a result, there is growing discussion in Western countries, including the United States, warning about an “arc of autocracy” formed by China and Russia, leading to policies that sow divisions.

Since the mid-2010s, as Washington’s narrative of strategic competition gained momentum, China and Russia have enhanced their strategic alignment.²² Behind it was China’s perception that the principles of the “post-war international order,” or the principles of respecting territorial integrity and non-interference in internal affairs as stipulated in the United Nations (UN) Charter, are being threatened by countries like the United States.²³ China and Russia have kept in step with each other on international issues, and have begun to vow to support each other and advance cooperation on international order and values.²⁴ An event that showcased China-Russia strategic cooperation in shaping the international order was the summit meeting between President Vladimir Putin of Russia and President Xi Jinping of China in early February 2022, during Putin’s visit to China for the Beijing Winter Olympics prior to the invasion of Ukraine. Following the meeting, the two leaders released the extensive “Joint Statement of the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation on

the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development.”²⁵ This Joint Statement outlined their common positions on democracy, development, security, and order. It underlined the legitimacy of their political systems, history, traditions, and cultures, and affirmed to collaborate and cooperate in wide-ranging areas in transforming the international order.²⁶

But Russia disrupted the international order. Strategic alignment with Russia may not be self-evident from China’s perspective. Marcin Kaczmarek writes, “Russia and China’s defiance of Western primacy in international politics provides a basis for cooperation.” At the same time, he points out the differences between the two countries. That is, China fundamentally seeks political and economic stability in the international order, while Russia seeks the symbolic recognition of its “great power” status and does not mind becoming an occasional spoiler of the international order.²⁷ Strengthening strategic cooperation with Russia, which continues its military invasion of Ukraine, does not contribute to political and economic stability. On the contrary, it is a factor that gives rise to divisions between China and Western countries, including the United States. What China takes as a given may be competition rather than division. Although China maintains its strategic partnership with Russia by assuming strategic competition with the United States, a close China-Russia partnership does not necessarily enhance China’s strategic competitiveness against the United States.²⁸ The discussion resulting from the prolonged war in Ukraine has revolved around whether Beijing will support Moscow in the face of economic and military struggles, not the other way around.

On the phone with Putin in June 2022, Xi Jinping emphasized the importance of bilateral and multilateral cooperation within frameworks such as the UN, BRICS, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), as well as unity and cooperation with emerging and developing countries.²⁹ Regarding the Ukraine issue, on the other hand, Xi stressed that China would “take an independent position,” indicating that its position was not in full alignment with Russia’s. Moreover, at the China-Russia summit meeting on the margins of the SCO Summit in September, Putin said to Xi, “We also understand your questions and your concerns,” and hinted that China and Russia were not entirely united on the Ukraine issue.³⁰

The NSS of the Biden administration characterizes China as “the only competitor” with the intent and power to transform the international order. Meanwhile, it identifies Russia as “an immediate threat” to the free and open international system. The NSS presents the view that China and Russia seek to remake the international order to create a world conducive to their autocracy, and designates them as strategic competitors. In other words,

the United States regards China as a long-term challenge and Russia as a short-term threat.

This is not to say that the United States has no doubts about continuing to see China and Russia as a unified bloc. After all, it is not easy to address a long-term challenge while dealing with a short-term threat. David Edelstein notes, “existing great powers, like the United States, tend to be more focused on the short term.”³¹ By applying this argument to the post-Ukraine invasion situation, the following can be inferred: if Russia’s “immediate threat” persists and the United States continues to focus its attention and resources on Europe, the U.S. perception of China’s long-term challenge may become relativized. Even in the United States, scholars have yet to converge on their assessment and outlook of China-Russia unity. Furthermore, it is unclear how the Russia factor will shape the U.S.-China strategic competition.

Regional Orders

The logic and dynamics of great power competition will likely influence the regional orders. As the U.S.-China strategic competition intensifies, many countries and regions will have to make difficult choices between economy or security and between the United States or China. China is the largest trading partner for many countries and regions around the world. Particularly countries in close geographical proximity to China seek stable and deeper relations with the country to maintain and expand their economic interests.³² At the same time, a host of countries, especially in East Asia, harbor doubts about China’s behavior toward other countries and its underlying intentions. These countries seek to strengthen their security relations with the United States in an attempt to balance China’s influence.

However, the logic of security and competition increasingly used to frame U.S.-China relations has made it ever more difficult for countries to choose between economy or security and between the United States or China. The fact that the security logic dominates Washington and Beijing’s strategies and policies blurs the distinction between economy and security. Economic dependence on China provides it with a means to exert external influence, while increasing the strategic vulnerabilities of dependent countries. The notion of “economic security” has gained ground, especially among Western countries. It has thus become difficult to develop economic relations with China solely based on interests and expectations.

At the leaders’ meeting among Japan, the United States, Australia, and India (Quad) held in Tokyo in May 2022, the Quad leaders confirmed their resolve to seek an order where “countries are free from all forms of military,

economic and political coercion,” and concurred to cooperate in areas such as infrastructure, cybersecurity, and critical and emerging technologies. According to President Biden of the United States, his proposed Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) initiative aims to create a “stronger, fairer, more resilient economy.”³³ Both can be understood as a part of the strategic competition with China, and as a result of the evolved version of the Quad, known as Quad 2.0, being considered an important tool for maintaining the regional balance of power in the context of the U.S.-China strategic competition.³⁴

Yet, not all countries have fully embraced the logic of security and competition. Nor have countries completely dispelled their doubts about U.S. foreign engagement, which rose during the Trump administration. Southeast Asian countries, for example, generally welcome the Biden administration’s engagement with the region. However, countries have mixed perceptions of the United States due to the administration’s conflicting arguments and complex messages amid the intensifying U.S.-China strategic competition.³⁵ In South Asia, while the India-China competition could reflect the Sino-U.S. strategic competition, Washington’s direct role in the competition is limited, and other countries in South Asia are keeping their distance from the U.S.-China-India competition.³⁶ U.S. foreign engagement has yet to gain sufficient trust from regional countries.³⁷ As already mentioned, many countries have doubts about China’s external actions and intentions. It appears that regional countries have not given their full consent to either the United States or China becoming a provider of order.

The U.S.-China strategic competition does not manifest itself in every region automatically and directly. The strategic competition is translated into the strategies and policies of each country and region through the lens of their strategic environment and domestic politics. This was made evident in the world after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Countries like Japan and Australia, witnessing Russia’s military invasion, are increasingly alarmed that changes to the status quo by force will spill over into Asia. These countries have provided robust support to Ukraine, while aligning themselves with the United States’ strategic competition with China. At the same time, numerous countries have maintained their energy and military partnership with Russia and have demonstrated a neutral stance. Moreover, these countries often have affinity with China in their values.

In Europe, the manifestation of the Russian threat has shown the sustainability of the security structure centered around the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This has led to a growing demand for expanded deterrence by the United States.³⁸ Europe and the United States both perceive Russia as “an immediate threat.” In such an environment,

Russia is likely to become more dependent on China, while the European Union (EU) seeks to move away from its multifaceted dependence on China and Russia.³⁹ From this perspective, in the Indo-Pacific where strategic competition is mainly playing out, U.S.-Europe coordination following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is expected to become an effective tool for the China policies of the United States and its Indo-Pacific allies. However, the effectiveness depends on how high of a threat is perceived in each strategic environment. As already noted, Europe’s strategic environment is still uncertain. If U.S. interests and resources are concentrated in Europe, it may relativize the U.S. perception of China’s long-term challenge. Conversely, if China’s long-term challenge manifests as “an immediate threat,” such as across the Taiwan Strait, U.S. interest and resource allocation toward Europe would relatively decrease.

It remains to be seen what the dynamics of great power competition will bring to the world. This will likely become clearer amid the complex interplay of factors, such as the U.S. and Chinese logic of strategic competition, the way U.S.-China relations evolve, the Russia factor, and regional strategic environments.