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# RESEARCH BRIEF

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## A Framework for Examining Long-Term Strategic Competition Between Major Powers

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**T**he concept of long-term peacetime competition between great powers is deeply rooted in history. This brief offers a framework for thinking about a family of peacetime competitive strategies. It begins by describing the concept and provides four approaches to competitive strategy: denial, cost imposition, attacking a competitor's strategy, and attacking a competitor's political system. It then explores the criteria that strategists and policymakers should consider in formulation of a competitive strategy. It concludes with some thoughts on how to evaluate the success of such a strategy and how the United States measures up.

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## THINKING ABOUT COMPETITIVE STRATEGIES

Even though the term “competitive strategies” entered the US Department of Defense lexicon in the 1970s, the concept of long-term peacetime competition between great powers is quite old. History contains a number of cases of such competitions, ranging from Athens and Sparta in the third century BCE to the United States and the Soviet Union during the second half of the twentieth century. Some, such as the Anglo-American rivalry, ended peacefully and amicably. Others, such as the Anglo-German competition, led to war. Still others, such as the US-Soviet competition, yielded conflicts on the periphery and an armed and sometimes uneasy peace between the central actors.

It is important to situate competitive strategies within the larger realm of strategy, which has to do with how a state or other political actor arrays its resources in space and time to achieve its aims against a competitor. Simply put, strategy represents the way an actor seeks to achieve his political objectives against a competitor. The key features of any strategy are rationality (the existence of political objectives and a plan to achieve them) and interaction with a competitor—an actor that seeks at the very least to achieve different objectives from, if not to thwart, those of its rivals.

Competitive strategies follow the logic of strategy, but are implemented in peacetime. Competitive strategies can, and often do, involve the use of military assets, but they focus on the latent use of force to deter or coerce, rather than to defeat, competitors. Strategy in peacetime occurs with a greater sense of uncertainty than in war. In addition, statesmen and soldiers operating in peacetime generally have a much lower tolerance for risk than they do in war, and it takes longer to determine the effects of the strategy.

There are four families of competitive strategies that are distinct but not mutually exclusive: denial, cost imposition, attacking a competitor’s strategy, and attacking a competitor’s political system.

### ***Strategies of Denial***

Strategies of denial seek to prevent a competitor from translating operational means into political ends. More specifically, these strategies seek to convince a competitor’s leadership that it would be impossible to achieve its political objectives through military means. To work, the defender needs to be able to demonstrate that an aggressor cannot achieve its aims at an acceptable cost.

For some states, geography is favorable to a strategy of denial. With the right investment in capabilities, for example, Taiwan could harden itself against Chinese coercion given its location across the Taiwan Strait. In other cases, geography is less favorable.

Trends in military technology—particularly the growth and spread of precision weaponry as well as supporting intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems and command and control networks—increasingly favor a strategy of denial, even for small states.

### ***Cost-Imposing Strategies***

Whereas strategies of denial seek to convince a competitor that it cannot achieve its aims, cost-imposing strategies seek to convince an adversary’s leadership that the costs of doing so are prohibitively high and that accommodation would be a more attractive option.

Cost-imposing strategies may have any number of effects upon a competitor. They may, for example, dissuade or deter competitors from engaging in actions that are disruptive or threatening by convincing them that such actions are too costly, ineffective, or counter-productive.

They may alternatively seek to channel a competitor into engaging in non-offensive or wasteful activities. States need to think about imposing costs across economic and political as well as military dimensions.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Attacking a Competitor’s Strategy***

A third approach is to induce a competitor to engage in strategically self-defeating behavior. For example, the development of the AirLand Battle doctrine by the US Army and Air Force in the 1970s and 1980s combined US technological advantages with deep understanding of Soviet strategic and operational predilections—including a need to choreograph operations and concern over the security of the Soviet homeland—to shake the confidence of Soviet leadership in its ability to carry out its preferred strategy. Similarly, China’s development of anti-access/area denial capabilities is an effort to shake the confidence of US decision-makers in the approach to power projection followed by the United States since the end of World War II.

### ***Attacking a Competitor’s Political System***

Finally, strategies that attack a competitor’s political system seek to exploit and influence factions within that system. For example, recent scholarship indicates that President Reagan’s 1983 announcement of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) triggered a debate within the Soviet leadership over the wisdom of competing with the United States in space weaponry, as well as the form that competition should take. David Broad suggests that the announcement of SDI ultimately set up a situation in which Soviet leaders who favored a high-tech competition with the United States in space arms initially carried the day, only to be discredited by their inability to field high-tech weapons. That is, SDI put in motion a chain

<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Mahnken, *Cost-Imposing Strategies: A Brief Primer* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2014).

of events that ultimately made the Soviet leadership aware that it could not compete with the United States in this arena.<sup>2</sup>

## FORMULATING AND IMPLEMENTING A COMPETITIVE STRATEGY

Five considerations should govern the development and implementation of a competitive strategy, such as that of cost imposition, in peacetime.

First, one cannot develop strategy against an abstraction. In peace and in war, it needs to be aimed at a particular adversary. An understanding of the competitor's aims, strengths, weaknesses, and proclivities is central to strategic effectiveness.

Second, in order to develop, implement, and monitor a strategy, one must possess sufficient information to allow assessment of its effectiveness, or at the least to safeguard against undesirable second-order effects. A thorough understanding of both one's own strengths and weaknesses and those of the competitor is necessary to ensure a reasonable chance that actions will elicit the intended response, or at least narrow the range of potential competitor response.

Third, an effective strategy should take into account (and even exploit) the often overlooked fact that both sides in a competition possess limited resources. Indeed, the fact of limited resources—monetary, human, and technological—and the costs associated with them is central to cost-imposing strategies. Similarly, effective strategy should consider that both sides in a competition are not unitary actors, but rather bureaucratic entities that have their own preferences, proclivities, and culture, which may lead to performance that diverges considerably from the optimal.

Fourth, such a strategy should exploit time. That is, it should consid-

er not only what actions should be taken, but also when, with the latter timed to achieve the maximum effect. Time costs are important and may translate into deterrent effects. Cost-imposing strategies, in concert with strategies of denial, should seek to frustrate and delay competitors from achieving dangerous and disruptive capabilities.

Finally, such strategies should account for interaction. Competitors will respond at times and in ways that are unexpected. Indeed, they should be expected to seek to drive the competition in ways that favor them.

For planning purposes it is useful to think of a competition as an interactive three-move sequence made up of an initial action, a competitor's responses to it, and a subsequent counter-action. The initial action should seek to elicit a response from a competitor—to dissuade it from undesirable actions or channel its behavior in favorable ways. The action should be undertaken with at least a first-order sense of how the competitor may (or perhaps must) respond. However, the actual nature and timing of the competitor's response will provide additional information and should make subsequent counter-action more effective. Ideally, any counter-action should take advantage of the competitor's response.

## ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF COMPETITIVE STRATEGIES

There are several ways to measure the effectiveness of a competitive strategy over time. One is by measuring the costs that it imposes on the competitor across the dimensions described above. A successful strategy should impose costs out of proportion with the expenditure required to do so. Ultimately, it should impose costs on a competitor sufficient to affect its decision-making calculus and,

over time, change its strategic behavior. These costs should be low for the initiator and high for the competitor.

Another measure of effectiveness involves strategic options. A successful strategy should increase the range of competitive options available to the initiator and constrain those available to the target. A successful strategy should make the most disruptive and dangerous options unattractive to competitors while at the same time increasing the set of options open to the initiator.

A final set of measures has to do with initiative. The side that is implementing a successful strategy should possess the initiative in the competition, controlling its pace and scope while forcing its competitor to react.

Viewed against these criteria, recent US strategic performance has been poor. In recent years the United States has found itself on the wrong side of cost-imposing strategies inflicted by competitors. Moreover, military modernization by competitors is constraining the strategic options open to the United States at the same time that rivals are gaining a larger set of options. In a number of key areas, the United States has lost the initiative and is reacting to competitors' moves rather than setting the scope and pace of the competition.

The United States can, and should, do better. Analogies to the past are always imperfect, and those to the US-Soviet competition during the Cold War can be misleading. Still, to the extent that the analogy holds, the current US situation is more akin to that of the 1950s than the 1980s. That is, the United States is still in the early stages of formulating a competitive strategy for the long term. To improve US strategic performance, the national security community needs to better identify enduring US strengths and weaknesses and those of key competitors such as China.

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2 David E. Hoffman, *The Dead Hand* (New York: Doubleday, 2009).

## CONCLUSIONS

History shows that peacetime competitions are long term, lasting decades. Whether we recognize it or not, China and Russia have been competing with the United States for some time. We can expect this to continue whether or

not we consciously choose to pursue a competitive strategy. The ultimate issue for US policymakers is not whether to compete, but whether to do so consciously, in a way that advances US interests. Both history and strategic logic suggest that the formulation and implementation of a thoughtful

long-term strategy can only improve US strategic performance.

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