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GETTING GREAT POWER COMPETITION RIGHT

BY BRAD GLOSSERMAN

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International politics is increasingly shaped by great power competition, a world in which the two chief antagonists are the United States and China. For some (the author among them), this struggle increasingly resembles the Cold War, although the analogy is not exact. Accepting that this is a new and expanding era of competition does not mean that this simple characterization is complete: calling it a competition and a determination to compete vigorously across many dimensions is not enough. If the West is to prevail in this competition, it must do three things.

First, competition between the two countries must be bounded. Even during the Cold War the US-Soviet contest was constrained. The prospect of mutual assured destruction gave those two governments ample reason to find common ground to prevent a nuclear war. Today, the struggle between the US and China is expanding into all dimensions of national power: diplomacy, information, military, economics, aid, and politics. Yet, the need for Washington and Beijing to work together on issues of common concern is no less compelling. There are problems in the region and the world – global warming, nuclear proliferation, and a stable trade and financial system are three that come immediately to mind – that can only be solved if the two countries cooperate.

Second, this competition must not be reduced to a fight between the US and China. Too often, this struggle is characterized as a battle for supremacy between the two countries, the product of ideological differences, power politics, or opposing political systems. Claims that the two governments were caught in a "Thucydides trap" – a struggle between the status quo power and a challenger for regional supremacy – provided a historical and theoretical veneer for such reductionism. This bilateral frame is incorrect, however, and does the US and supporters of that system a disservice. This is not a simple struggle between two countries. Many governments align with the US in defense of existing rules, values, and institutions; dismissing or ignoring them reduces their role and importance, diminishes the weight and power of the position they support, and transforms the entire dispute into a binary choice between two countries. It is much more than a fight between the current champion and the rising challenger.

It is ironic that this reductionism is occurring as the US is being eclipsed as the most stalwart defender of the existing international order. Historically, the US has been the most prominent voice in defense of the status quo but other governments, notably Japan, Australia and the EU, have assumed leading roles. Framing it as US-China competition denies those countries agency and authority. More significantly, ignoring or downplaying them means that there is no obvious defender of the status quo when the US is silent. The defense of the existing order is far more compelling when it is dozens of countries on that side; China may have allies or like-minded countries, but it is safe to say that it is in a minority. This wider perspective is essential to understand the stakes and to help determine the outcome of the contest between the two sides.

In addition, acknowledging that there is a consensus view is critical if that consensus goes against China: one of the most effective counters to Chinese policy is a united front. The importance and weight of consensus is evident from the effort that China makes to prevent the formation of one that challenges its preferred positions.

Third, there must be significant institutional reform of the international system. On one level, the US-China fight is about order (regional and global) and the rules, norms, and institutions that create and sustain it. China and other rising powers argue that they did not participate in the building of the international order that was constructed after World War II. They profited from it – their growth and prosperity is one of the most compelling arguments in its favor, a clear indicator of its success – but it reflects a distinctly trans-Atlantic perspective and the countries that are now among (or soon to be) the world's leading powers have different views of the priority and interpretation of values and rules. In a truly "democratic" global system, they would be changed. In short, and to be crude, the West supports a liberal order by illiberal means.

This cannot persist. Most international organizations and institutions need reform. For example, the hold that the US and Europe have on the top positions in the World Bank and the IMF, respectively, should end and voting rights in those organizations should be reallocated. The World Trade Organization must adapt to new technologies and the realities of the new global economy. The United Nations Security Council should also be reviewed but that is a far less likely prospect. The rise of the G20 as the guiding mechanism for global economic policy, effectively supplanting the G7, is an important and illustrative step in the right direction. It is by no means perfect, but it demonstrates a readiness to respond to new global power dynamics.

It is important to recognize, too, the seeming paradox, at the heart of this situation. Admitting that the system needs reform would seem to undercut the legitimacy of any consensus in favor of the status quo. In fact, the two positions can co-exist. The key is ensuring that changes are made in a way that is consensual and multilateral. The core of this fight is not about the *substance* of change, but about the *process* of revision. No single country should be able to tear up the existing order and write its own rules. Unilateralism is the greatest threat to the existing global order and all those who seek to defend it must keep the spotlight focused upon that danger.

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