

No Competition – Why China Wins Over Russia in Great Power Competition

The U.S. national security strategy has pivoted from multinational threat actors to just two – China and Russia – as part of their focus on “Great Power Competition.” While the threat environment is not limited to China and Russia, the focus has valid reasons. Russia has significantly invested in modernizing their military capabilities, systems, and nuclear enterprise. They have been developing a multitude of electronic warfare capabilities that exploit U.S. dependence on the electromagnetic spectrum and possess hypersonic air-to-air missiles. And their cyber and information warfare capabilities are well known in Europe and the U.S. Likewise, China has also been investing heavily in their forces and multi-domain capabilities, building aircraft carriers and fifth generation fighters, modernizing conventional forces and nuclear forces. Meanwhile, China is threatening to take the lead in artificial intelligence technology.

What pushes China further ahead of Russia is their multi-faceted threat backed by a concerted commitment of all elements of national power. Economically, China’s GDP is four times that of Russia’s and it has been systemically establishing economic footholds across Africa and Latin America to secure natural resources and trade routes. The ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aims to create a unified worldwide market underpinned by infrastructure, technology, and human capital. But leveraging a full range of political, economic and social assets is a calculated strategy to expand China’s influence, as well as intimidate their partners and opponents. BRI is criticized as a ‘debt-trap diplomacy’ that could also compel support across the Indo-Pacific for China’s claims over Taiwan. Furthermore, China adeptly operates in grey zone warfare. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, for example, named China as “perpetrating the greatest intellectual property theft in human history” for stealing sensitive data and technologies from U.S. military, government, critical infrastructure and corporate networks. Nations who partner with Chinese firms (beholden to China’s government) to build 5G networks are warned for putting themselves at considerable risk for access to their networks. Such vulnerability would jeopardize military interoperability and intelligence sharing, and compromise commercial institutions. And unlike Russia, China abides by no shared deterrence constructs, arms control agreements, or inspections regimes.

The U.S. has also been slow to recognize the different strategic mindsets of these peer competitors. Each has ambitious long-term goals, but Russia’s chess-like game plan is more familiar. The U.S. is less understanding of the Chinese, who play a different game, like Go. And the U.S. doesn’t have the experienced cadre of China experts like it does for Russia, either. In June, the Department of Defense created the position of Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China to advise the Secretary of Defense on all things China and maintain the military relationship with China. However, creating a narrow focus on China may create new organizational stovepipes, while ignoring regional allies who play a major role in attempts to shift China’s behavior.

In this new era of great power competition, the U.S. remains the pre-eminent global power with major global commitments. However, China has been far more successful in its global hegemonic ambitions than its northern neighbor. While Russia shouldn’t be relegated in this threat environment, the U.S.’ biggest threats these days are clearly made in China.