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Return of Great Power Rivalry

By Sir John Scarlett and Shashi Jayakumar

SYNOPSIS

Astute students of security and geopolitics might be forgiven for thinking, on the basis of developments in recent years, that we are faced with the re-emergence of the Great Power rivalry, with the key protagonists being the US, Russia and China.

COMMENTARY

DISCUSSION ABOUT Great Powers frequently focus on the prosperity and robust economy of these countries e.g. the United States and China. However, that is not the focus in Russia, where Great Power projection is largely seen through the lens of military power. By this measure, Russia has successfully reasserted itself as a Great Power of the 21st century.

Following the end of the Cold War, there existed a strong sense of resentment in Russia about its treatment as a relic of the past rather than as a contemporary power. Even the most seasoned analysts fail to understand the sense of humiliation and resentment towards the US.

Russia's Reassertion under Putin

Russia has demonstrated its power at several moments over the last two decades of Putin's presidency. Perhaps most salient (and most reminiscent of Russia's 20th century role on the global stage) has been its persistent bid to widen Russia's influence beyond its borders.

Russia's return to great power status is closely linked to the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Ukraine. Ukraine, in particular, is an existential issue for the Kremlin. Russia is unlikely to pull back from the territory it has occupied in Ukraine.

Russia has also asserted itself in the Middle East, particularly in Syria. Its foray into Syria involved an adroit and successful campaign that has been critical for the survival of the Assad regime. Putin has made use of an existing vacuum in the area, coming to the (correct) judgement that the one power capable of pushing it out – the US – would not do so.

China

China has been on the ascendant for several decades, but geopolitical rivalry has become much more of a factor in the time of Xi Jinping.

Externally, there has also been a greater consolidation of control and an increased projection of power over territorial disputes, particularly the South China Sea. The sheer scale of Chinese presence and infrastructure being plugged into the South China Sea indicates a long-term determination to assert sovereignty.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), encompassing two-thirds of the world's population and some 60 countries, has been built on low interest loans rather than aid grants; it has left many partner countries in debt to China, and has elicited a strong pushback from some of them. The US, India and Japan have also expressed concern.

Xi Jinping's rise to and consolidation of power has seen a concomitant increase in the level of control – especially in recent years – exerted by the Chinese Communist Party and a greater restriction of space for political conversation within China.

However, there are at the same time important unknowns, including opacity in the decision-making and policymaking in Beijing, as well as internal criticism of overreach by Xi Jinping.

The United States

In the face of rising (or resurgent) powers, the US must provide calm and certain leadership – without this the rest of the world is disorientated.

While President Trump seems keen on a trade deal with China, this will – if it is achieved – be of limited effect. Ongoing trade tensions aside, the longer-term theme in US-China relations is likely to be underlying competition. The Huawei saga is a prime case in point. On this issue, there is a near unanimity view across the US national security community and – unusually – across the political divide too.

A complicating factor is that battles for influence and power now take place on the virtual stage, with disinformation campaigns playing an important role in the ongoing Great Power rivalry. There is no doubt that there was a major interference campaign embarked on by Russia in the 2016 elections.

However, there is less consensus on the exact objective of this campaign. It could be argued that was a greater focus on undermining the democratic institutions that define the American state and the integrity of the intelligence services that protect it. There is less evidence there were targeted attempts at changing votes for any particular candidate.

Way Forward: Managing Risk

It is of course very difficult to be wholly objective – human beings almost all the time have preconceived ideas about the other side. This is true for intelligence professionals just as it is true for political leaders.

Here, it is worth looking into the past. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher came to realise in the aftermath of the 1983 Exercise Able Archer incident (which saw Soviet misunderstanding of a NATO exercise and suspicion that this was a prelude to a nuclear first strike, which would have invited a catastrophic escalatory actions on both sides) that dialogue was needed to prevent recurrences.

It was, she came to realise, necessary to understand the thinking of the other side. This meant an admission that, on one's own side, the understanding of the other was not as good as it should be. But in addition, engaging the Kremlin meant an effort to bring the Soviets out of their own bubble.

Likewise, current circumstances reveal a fair amount of misunderstanding. Many people in Moscow appear to believe the US is plotting to overthrow the Russian leadership; at the same time there may be *lack of appreciation of this very perception* within the US' leadership.

It is also worth asking whether the CCP leadership understands the policies of President Trump, or whether there are misinterpretations in Beijing about the likely course of US policy pertaining to China – which in turn would have consequences.

Perspective is essential. Great power rivalry has returned, but this is not a new Cold War. That said, the current scenario is worthy of concern. Better leadership and stronger knowledge are essential if we are to navigate these dangerous waters.

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