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The Long Game: Understanding US and China's Theories of Victory

By examining how the U.S. and China perceive the nature of their contest and plot their paths to success, we can better anticipate the trajectory of this competition.

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The strategic competition between the United States and China has become the defining geopolitical challenge of the current era. As tensions escalate across multiple domains – from trade and technology to military posturing – it is crucial to understand the underlying logic driving each nation's approach.

At the core of this competition lie two distinct “theories of victory”: overarching visions of how each power aims to prevail in the long term. These theories fundamentally shape critical policy decisions, diplomatic maneuvers, and resource allocations. By examining how the U.S. and China perceive the nature of their contest and plot their paths to success, we can better anticipate the trajectory of this competition and its profound implications for the future global order.

Strategic Competition and Theory of Victory

Throughout history, major powers have engaged in sustained rivalries that fall short of outright war. The Cold War between the United States and Soviet Union is a classic example, but others include the 19th century “Great Game” between Britain and Russia in Central Asia, and the naval arms race between Britain and Germany before World War I.

In these extended contests, nations usually develop what strategists call a “[theory of victory](#)” to guide their actions. A theory of victory encompasses several key elements. It begins with a clear articulation of what constitutes “victory” in a given competition. This is coupled with a realistic assessment of the adversary’s strengths and weaknesses, and an understanding of one’s own comparative advantages and vulnerabilities. Ultimately, the theory of victory must tell a state how and why it could coordinate a number of key measures to prevail against a particular adversary.

Theories of victory differ from [grand strategies](#) in their specificity and adaptability. While a grand strategy outlines a nation’s broad, long-term goals, a theory of victory is tailored to prevail against a particular target within a specific competitive context. For instance, during the Cold War, the United States’ theory of victory centered on containment and outlasting the Soviet system, adapting over time from the Truman Doctrine to détente and finally to Reagan’s strategy of “peace through strength.”

Competing Visions: U.S. and China's Theories of Victory

The United States' theory of victory centers on comprehensively undermining China's rise while preserving U.S. global preeminence. Ultimately, it seeks to force China to accept a subordinate role in the U.S.-led global order or risk economic stagnation and diplomatic isolation.

In the technological realm, the United States has implemented stringent measures to maintain its superiority. [Strict export controls](#) on advanced semiconductors and related technologies, initiated in October 2022 and expanded in 2023, aim to prevent China from achieving parity in critical tech sectors like artificial intelligence and quantum computing. The ban on federal agencies using equipment from Huawei and ZTE, coupled with investment restrictions in sensitive technologies, further exemplifies this strategy.

Economically, the U.S. is employing a multi-pronged approach to "[de-risk](#)" its economy while constraining China's growth and its ability to fund military expansion. The strategy extends beyond the tech sector, encompassing trade policies, supply chain restructuring, and domestic investment. Significant tariffs on a wide range of Chinese goods, implemented under Section 301 of the Trade Act and maintained across administrations, aim to counteract perceived unfair trade practices. These tariffs cover industries from agriculture to manufacturing, putting pressure on China's export-driven economic model.

Diplomatically, the United States is strengthening its position through a network of alliances and partnerships, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. The formation of [minilateral groupings](#) like the Quad and AUKUS aim to enhance regional defense capabilities and counter China's growing assertiveness. Concurrently, the U.S. has been deepening and upgrading bilateral partnerships with key countries such as Japan, Indonesia, and Vietnam, while also engaging more

actively with Pacific Island nations. These diplomatic efforts, complemented by initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, are designed to create a robust counterweight to China's influence, limit Beijing's ability to reshape regional and global norms, and maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific aligned with U.S. interests.

In contrast, as the challenger, China's theory of victory revolves around the concept of comprehensive national power and a more indirect approach to outgrowing the United States. This strategy aims to gradually shift the global balance of power in China's favor and to draw countries away from the U.S. camp through various means. By offering alternatives in trade, investment, and development models, China seeks to erode U.S. global leadership without direct confrontation.

A cornerstone of China's approach is achieving technological self-reliance. Programs like "[Made in China 2025](#)" and [substantial investments in research and development](#) across many sectors demonstrate China's commitment to breaking free from U.S. technological dominance. By developing its own advanced technologies, such as Huawei's 5G networks, China aims to set global standards and reduce vulnerability to U.S. pressure.

Economically, China is focused on expanding its global presence and influence, particularly through initiatives like the [Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\)](#). By investing in infrastructure projects across Asia, Africa, and Europe, China is creating a network of countries economically tied to Beijing. This strategy aims to gradually erode U.S. global leadership by offering an alternative model of development and partnership.

Militarily, China is modernizing its conventional and [nuclear forces](#) with a focus on anti-access/area denial capabilities. The development of advanced missile systems, like the DF-21D "carrier killer," and the expansion of its naval forces are designed to make U.S. intervention in what China perceives as its "sphere of

influence,” particularly in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea, prohibitively costly.

China believes that as more countries align with it economically and diplomatically, the United States will find itself increasingly isolated and unable to dictate global norms. The end goal is not necessarily a brand new world order with China at its center, but rather a significantly revised international system that is more accommodating to China's interests and influence. This revised order would build on the current foundation of international institutions and norms, but with China playing a much more prominent role in shaping global governance.

China aims to achieve this not through direct confrontation but through steady, long-term growth in all aspects of national power, creating a multipolar world where it stands as an equal, if not superior, to the United States.

What This Means for the World

The contrasting theories of victory adopted by the United States and China reflect fundamentally different worldviews and strategic cultures. While the U.S. adopts a more direct containment approach, China pursues a more indirect, multifaceted strategy of accumulating comprehensive national power. This divergence largely stems from their respective positions – the U.S. as the incumbent superpower seeking to maintain its primacy, and China as the rising challenger aiming to reshape the international order in its favor.

The effectiveness of these strategies remains to be seen. The U.S. approach may succeed in slowing China's technological advancement and limiting its global influence in the short term. However, it risks alienating allies and neutral countries who may be reluctant to choose sides. China's more subtle approach could gradually erode U.S. influence, but it may struggle to overcome growing international skepticism about its intentions and methods, particularly as its economic growth slows and its demographic challenges intensify.

For the global order and smaller countries, this strategic competition has profound implications. The world is likely to see increased fragmentation in technology standards, trade networks, and even value systems. Smaller nations may find themselves under stronger pressure to align with either the United States or China in different domains, potentially leading to a new form of bloc politics. However, this also presents opportunities for astute middle powers to leverage the competition to their advantage, potentially by playing both sides or forming their own coalitions.

The intensifying rivalry could accelerate technological innovation but also raise the risks of conflict, particularly in flashpoints like Taiwan or the South China Sea. It may also complicate global cooperation on pressing issues such as climate change, pandemic preparedness, and nuclear non-proliferation.

Attempts at economic de-risking, even if not complete, may lead to the creation of parallel systems in finance, technology, and trade. This could increase resilience in some areas but also reduce overall global economic efficiency and potentially slow growth.

Ultimately, the outcome of this contest will shape the rules, norms, and power dynamics of the 21st century. As the theories of victory of both powers continue to play out, the world must navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by this new era of great power competition. The ability of other nations to defend their own autonomy and foster cooperation in critical areas may well determine whether this strategic competition leads to a more fragmented and conflict-prone world or to a new, stable international order that accommodates both established and rising powers.

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