Source URL : <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/131494.html>

Author: Hu Bo

Title: The particularity and risks of strategic competition between China and the United States

Publication date: 2022-02-14

Text:

Chinese officials do not recognize the term "strategic competition." Because it is an academic concept, we will mention it. Because of the development of China's power, the power gap between China and the United States has narrowed, but competition between China and the United States exists objectively. There are many interpretations of the competition between China and the United States, such as the "Thucydides Trap" and "New Cold War". However, what I want to say is that these many conclusions may oversimplify history. Whether compared with other major powers in history or with previous Sino-US competitions, the particularity of today's Sino-US competition may be unprecedented in at least five aspects.

1. Sea and air are the main arenas

The ocean is the main area of ​​great power competition between China and the United States, which is different from most cases of great power competition in history. China and the United States are far apart in terms of nuclear capabilities and scale. China is not the United States' main competitor in the nuclear field. China and the United States do not share a land border, and the United States military has not yet been deployed to China's border areas. Therefore, the possibility of direct land contact between the two sides is very small. Only in the sea in the Western Pacific region, the balance of power between China and the United States is changing rapidly, and it may become evenly matched, thus becoming the focus of competition. Compared with previous major-country relations, today's conflicts and instability between China and the United States are mainly concentrated at sea and on land, while the nuclear field is largely safe.

Competition at sea is often fluid because there is no front or rear or the constraints of fixed boundaries. Both sea and air platforms are mobile, which virtually increases the scope of competition and makes the competitive situation more complex. In terms of offensive and defensive balance, naval platforms have inherent flexibility. It is quite difficult to distinguish whether a certain platform and weapon is offensive or defensive. A country's development of its navy and sea power, no matter what the reason, is seen as expansionary behavior by its opponents. On the one hand, this will enhance its own deterrence, but at the same time, it will also stimulate more conflicts. Although strong defensive power is usually regarded as the most effective deterrent, sea power is a contradictory balance, that is, while effectively responding to the threat of war, it also increases the risk of friction and conflict.

2. Asymmetry and asymmetry between capabilities and interests

At the end of the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union were basically on par in both the conventional and nuclear fields. Although China has made remarkable achievements in military modernization in recent years and will continue to develop, in the foreseeable future, Sino-US military relations will still be asymmetrical, with the United States retaining a clear advantage. The US military's weapons, training and system capabilities are still far stronger than those of the Chinese People's Liberation Army. This asymmetry can lead to instability due to the lack of credible deterrence from each other. In addition, the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union was mainly concentrated in the intermediate areas such as Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America. Except for nuclear deterrence, one side usually did not directly threaten the sovereignty and security of the other side. Between the United States and the Soviet Union (Russia), no one feels that the power gains it has achieved are being "taken away" or that what belongs to it should be "taken back." In the Sino-US game, competition is mainly limited to China’s periphery. China is at an obvious strategic disadvantage, and the United States is deeply involved in China's national unity, territorial integrity, sovereignty, and maritime rights and interests. China basically does not have the ability to project military power around the United States and intervene militarily in U.S. affairs. Moreover, unlike during the Cold War when the United States and the Soviet Union generally accepted the balance of power in Europe, today China and the United States are still unable to recognize each other's dominant position and power presence in East Asian waters, including the East China Sea, the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.

3. High transparency of the gaming environment

For a long time, the confidentiality of interactions and the centralization of decision-making have been important guarantees for the turnaround and development of Sino-US relations, but this condition is becoming increasingly problematic. On the one hand, there are more and more entities participating in and influencing decision-making in the United States, and there are more and more noises. Especially in the context of intensified domestic politics, being tough on China has become "politically correct" in the United States. On the other hand, objectively speaking, the strategic and tactical environments of the crisis management game between China and the United States are becoming more and more transparent, which will constrain the crisis decision-making of both countries.

The first is the transparency of the strategic environment. The extensive participation of the mass media and the public has greatly influenced the decision-making of various countries. In the past, the military game between major powers was basically limited to the high-level and professional commanding agencies of the two countries, who monopolized the situation and information. Within the military, most people just follow orders. In today's world, open source data is abundant, media, especially social media, is highly developed. The public pays great attention to military equipment, operations and friction events. Military games are difficult to keep secret and basically exist in an open environment. Dealing with emergencies or military crises often requires "quiet diplomacy," and most major crises in history have been well resolved through this method. However, in today's world, this is almost impossible. Moreover, as time goes by, the difficulties caused by this transparency will become more serious. If the Sino-US plane collision incident 20 years ago had occurred in 2021, even if other conditions remained unchanged, it would not have been resolved like that. Because the transparency of the strategic environment will make the resolution of incidents more difficult.

Second is the transparency of the tactical environment. In on-site confrontations or confrontations, the battlefield situation is often clear at a glance due to the development of all-weather and all-round early warning, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR). This will increase the dilemma of the "zero-sum game", because no one wants to be a coward or the party that takes the initiative to give in. In the maritime friction and confrontation between China and the United States, this dilemma is even more obvious because both sides have strong situational awareness capabilities.

4. Huge Differences in Strategic Culture

China and the United States have completely different geographical environments, historical experiences, and national systems, and there are very large cultural differences in the use and use of force. In past major power competitions, there were of course strategic and cultural differences between the parties, but rarely such a big gap between China and the United States. The United States pursues absolute security and implements an offensive national defense policy, extending its defense lines to the vast world including China's periphery; while China still pursues a defensive national defense policy, with its strategic focus centered on its homeland and its surrounding areas. This difference leads to markedly different priorities in a crisis. The United States values ​​influence above all else, while China's core concern is territorial sovereignty. American scholar Alastair Iain Johnston compared the behavioral differences between China and traditional powers such as the United States and the Soviet Union in crises, and came to a similar conclusion: China attaches far greater importance to territorial sovereignty than the United States, Russia and other countries. The explanation he gave was that China is a newly independent country with a century-old history of humiliation in modern times, and has special political legitimacy anxiety and nationalism.

Chinese culture values ​​peace and has always been cautious in using force. In fact, it is not accustomed to deterrence and reciprocal responses. When a crisis occurs, China mostly resorts to diplomatic offensives, condemning, protesting and reasoning, and avoids the use of force unless the situation is irreversible. Since diplomatic statements lack corresponding action support, the outside world often mistakenly believes that China's position and bottom line are unclear, and therefore has the urge to escalate the situation. Before a conflict or crisis breaks out, China is not good at taking preventive measures to actively respond. When a conflict or crisis breaks out, in order to avoid further losses, the reaction is often excessive. Such excessive behavior is negatively interpreted by the outside world as bellicosity, expansion, etc. The United States has a lower threshold for the use of force. It has been in a state of war for a long time since its independence. After the Cold War, American elite circles generally supported the use of force. Under the slogans of maintaining order and promoting democracy, the use of force increased explosively.

China's culture of emphasizing "stability" and "big picture" also determines that China will usually exercise restraint before a crisis is completely shown off or breaks out into a full-scale war. Emphasizing "stability" means that China has a restrained preference for "reducing big things to small things and trivial things to nothing". The overall view means that the crisis includes all levels of the front-line troops. While considering local gains and losses, they must also obey the country's overall foreign affairs and national defense overall situation. The United States is accustomed to seeking military, legal or technical solutions to specific problems through interest exchange. China places great emphasis on the demarcation of justice or responsibility. After the crisis broke out, China's first reaction was to clarify the merits of the incident rather than to manage the crisis itself. Out of considerations of separation of responsibilities and national dignity, China sometimes places more emphasis on symbolic gestures, such as apologies. The United States is accustomed to managing crises from a game perspective by using a combination of pressure and compromise. It pays more attention to the event itself. It often considers issues from an instrumental level, with a strong utilitarian tendency, that is, how to shape the scene, diplomacy, and public opinion situation that is more beneficial to itself, and how to use events to maximize its own interests.

The only thing the two sides have in common in terms of strategic culture is the lack of a habit of balance of power, which may constitute a major obstacle to crisis management. For a long time in ancient times, China often occupied a dominant position in East Asia. In modern times, China often exists in the world as a weak or big country, and has little experience of coexisting with other powerful countries as a strong country. The United States has become accustomed to its dominant position in the world, with innate arrogance and American exceptionalism. As Kissinger said, "The United States has never participated in a balance of power system in its history," and promoting national interests through a balance of power "has always been unacceptable to Americans."

5. Uncertainties brought about by technological development

The development of military technology is often an important factor in promoting or influencing the situation of military competition. The theory of offensive and defensive balance even believes that military technology is the most important systemic variable affecting strategic stability. Which one is more dominant, offense or defense, is first determined by the technical form at that time. A basic consensus is that innovations in platform mobility are more conducive to offense, while innovations in firepower are more conducive to defense.

There has not been a large-scale naval battle since World War II. But since then, many technologies have been developed—nuclear submarines, air defense systems, stealth, vertical-launch anti-ship missiles—that have yet to be tested in continuous combat. Recent innovations such as cyber weapons, anti-satellite weapons, hypersonic missiles, long-range anti-ship ballistic missiles, quantum computing and artificial intelligence have exacerbated this uncertainty.

Today's maritime military system has become quite complex, and the boundaries between land, sea, air, space, cyber and other domains have become blurred. Maritime military competition has become a confrontation between all elements and all military services. For the first time in history, mankind has experienced a truly global military confrontation. In this situation, it becomes increasingly difficult to accurately gauge your own capabilities and those of your opponents. It also means that arms control is difficult to operate and confidence-building measures difficult to build.

The application of unmanned systems and smart weapons will also weaken political and moral constraints on the use of force, thereby lowering the threshold for conflict or war. In addition, smart weapons may also suffer from misjudgment or misoperation due to algorithm disorder or electromagnetic interference. For example, continued development of cyber attack capabilities increases the risk of unintended escalation, potentially to the nuclear level, making the deterioration of U.S.-China military relations and the deteriorating security environment in the Asia-Pacific region even more worrisome. In the 1980s, when the U.S. military was formulating a maritime strategy against the Soviet Union, the underlying assumption was that the conflict was below the nuclear threshold and neither side had any motivation to use nuclear weapons. Today, neither China nor the United States can have confidence that it will not escalate to a nuclear conflict.

In short, the judgments of some media and many strategists have big problems, and they oversimplify history. In today's competition between China and the United States, there may not be any similar scenes in history, nor can we find similar experiences that can be used for reference. But that doesn’t mean that all experience is useless. At least we have to see the particularities, so we have to be cautious about many judgments, including the Cold War. What is the concept of the Cold War? The Cold War was a comprehensive group confrontation involving economic, political, military and other sectors under the leadership of the United States and the Soviet Union. How could there be a cold war today? Today is clearly not a Cold War. But it does not necessarily mean that it would be better if it were not a Cold War. Today's competition between China and the United States is very special in history because of at least the five factors mentioned above, resulting in very high uncertainty and instability in the outcome. The United States and the Soviet Union basically stabilized after the Cuban missile crisis in the 1970s. Both sides basically knew each other's bottom line. Today, China and the United States are still in a stage of constant strategic exploration. So the risk is relatively high at this stage. As for ocean competition, without front lines and rear areas, it is generally unlikely to cause large-scale wars. Today, this is still the case. For big countries, life and death at sea are not a matter of life, so the possibility of large-scale escalation is relatively small. Therefore, two trends in the future competition between China and the United States may be very obvious. The first is that competition between China and the United States will continue to intensify. The second trend is that despite this, both sides are still under the threshold of large-scale war, and this state can most likely be maintained.

Article source: This article is reprinted from the 2022 Issue 1 of "Journal of Ocean University of China".