

Competitive Strategies  
for the 21st Century

THEORY, HISTORY, AND PRACTICE



**Thomas G. Mahnken, ed. *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History, and Practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Security Studies – Stanford University Press, 2012.**

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Among the grand narratives of international relations in the early 21st century, China's ascendancy and potential challenge to the US-led world order is now the most dominant, and perhaps the most compelling. Ostensibly the latest instalment in an unceasing sequence of great powers' rise and fall, it resonates deeply with specialist and non-specialist audiences alike. Central aspects of the emerging Sino-American competition – diplomatic, economic, and military – have been addressed at length in a

variety of fora and from widely diverging perspectives. Yet, up to now, few analysts have formulated anything resembling a coherent, prescriptive framework for how the United States and its allies should approach the increasingly confrontational dynamics that mark the defining great power relationship of our time.

In *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History, and Practice*, editor Thomas Mahnken of the US Naval War College (NWC) has mustered an impressive array of academic strategists, defence analysts, and former practitioners to present such a framework. The volume, which is the product of a conference held at the NWC in 2010, attempts to set forth viable courses of action for US and allied decision-makers in dealing with the prospective challenges posed by China's military modernization and its ever more muscular behaviour in the security sphere. As such, it is both policy-focused and confidently prescriptive.

The volume's basic narrative, in which most of the chapters partake, is sketched out by Mahnken in his introductory chapter and reflects what is now the conventional wisdom in important parts of the US defence community. According to this standard account, China has been engaging in a one-sided military competition with the United States for at least a decade and a half, while the sole superpower was focusing its attention and resources elsewhere. As a result of the impressive modernization efforts of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the military balance in the Asia-Pacific has begun to turn against the United States. Unless America can find effective counters to emerging PLA capabilities and buttress the credibility of its conventional deterrent, the proponents of this line of argument insist, its alliances will erode and the mantle of regional leadership will inexorably pass on to Beijing.

To avert such an outcome and shape the Sino-American contest for supremacy in Asia in America's favour, Mahnken stresses the need for "a long-term strategic approach" (4). He is forthright in stating his conviction that the United States should consciously embrace competition with China – a view that is shared by many of the contributors. In Mahnken's view, the most suitable framework for the United States to rely on in confronting a rising China is the competitive strategies (CS) approach, developed by the US Department of Defense during the 1970s and 80s for dealing with the Soviet Union. What appears to most clearly set this approach apart from other

paradigms of strategic interaction is that it seeks to purposely leverage the opponent's deeply-ingrained preferences and fears to induce him to engage in self-defeating modes of behaviour over the long duration of a peacetime military rivalry.

The remainder of the volume explores the roots of the CS approach, its application during the Cold War, and its potential applicability to the Sino-American context. Consisting of seventeen chapters, the great majority of which are well thought-out and well-referenced, the book is segmented into four parts. Part One is devoted to the conceptual foundations of the competitive strategies paradigm. In the central chapter of this segment, Stephen Peter Rosen sets forth the basic logic of CS against the backdrop of some well-known patterns in what he aptly describes as "the routinely suboptimal behavior of large organizations" (14). He identifies several preconditions for the successful execution of competitive strategies, principally that the opponent exhibits the traits of "long-standing, structured organizations" which result in "predispositions to action that can be activated by external stimuli to induce interactions favourable to the United States" (24). He also contributes an even-handed discussion of some of the criticisms that are commonly made of CS, as well as alternative frameworks for thinking about strategic interaction. The following chapters by Bradford Lee and Barry Watts provide important theoretical context, but – while they are rich in general strategic insights – add relatively little to Rosen's exposition of the CS approach.

Part Two of the volume explores the genesis of the Competitive Strategies Initiative of the 1980s in considerable detail. Gordon Barrass embeds his account of the CS paradigm's evolution into the broader dynamics of the Cold War confrontation from Nixon to Reagan. He emphasizes the increasingly "competitive" nature of US strategy and force planning, and the role of Andrew W. Marshall and his Office of Net Assessment (ONA), which was established in 1973 to compose detailed estimates of long-term developments in US-Soviet relative power, in bringing this about. Importantly, Barass's chapter also traces the ultimate failure of CS as a formal approach to US defence planning to the same sort of organizational limitations it sought to target in the Soviet opponent – i.e., the stubborn persistence of ingrained modes of behaviour within the US military. The role of the net assessment methodology and of Mr. Marshall (to whom the volume is dedicated, and for whom several of the authors have worked in

the past) in the development of the Comparative Strategies Initiative is further accentuated in the chapter by David Gouré which follows.

In the final chapter of this segment, John Battilega provides a window into Soviet military theory, and the leverage points it offered for properly thought-out competitive strategies. In his view, the fact that these vulnerabilities were thoroughly understood by US decision-makers was an essential precondition of such strategizing. He also emphasizes that for CS initiatives to be effective, “the acquisition process [...] of the targeted country must not be more agile than [that] of the United States” (123) – an admonition that should give pause to a US military-industrial complex plagued by massive schedule delays and cost overruns. Finally, Battilega manages to add some nuance to largely investment-focused CS logic when he recommends that US strategists “think very broadly about the classes of costs that it may be possible to impose” (124) on the adversary, including time, resource, operational and opportunity costs.

All three contributions stress the impact of CS on Soviet defence investments and operational approaches, and credit them with further straining the Soviet economy. However, not least because the Cold War came to an end soon after the Pentagon bureaucracy had officially embraced (and then unceremoniously disposed of) the competitive strategies model as a planning device, the asserted causal links between CS thinking, US force structure decisions, and the overall trajectory of the US-Soviet competition remain somewhat tenuous.

Part Three begins to transpose the competitive strategies framework to the current Sino-American setting by investigating several key elements of the Asia-Pacific military balance, as well as the potential contributions of two major American allies. This segment is opened by an analytical survey of US-China dynamics in the naval sphere, provided by NWC professor James Holmes, who appropriately frames the central issue as one of geostrategic access. According to Holmes, the Asia-Pacific region is likely to see “a cycle of continuous challenge, reply, and mutual adaptation” (132) that will, inter alia, match Chinese advantages in political resolve and shore-based firepower against US advantages in coalition building and offensive submarine warfare.

Jaqueline Newmyer Deal’s contribution, which might as well have been titled “The Sources of Chinese Conduct,” then offers a stimulating – if controversial –

interpretation of Beijing's approach to strategic competition. According to Deal, Chinese decision-makers have long viewed their relationship with the United States in starkly competitive terms and concentrate on "concealing Chinese intentions and decision-making processes while preparing for the moment of decisive action" (148). Information control, perception management, and subversion of the enemy coalition are identified as key features of the Chinese strategic tradition, as is a penchant for subduing the enemy with maximum surprise. While many area studies experts more sympathetic to China would probably want to disagree, in whole or in part, with Deal's account, it should give engagement-minded strategists in Washington and elsewhere considerable food for thought.

The three chapters that follow each deal with a specific aspect of the military competition. The centrality of strategic and operational access in the Western Pacific is further explored by Dan Blumenthal. Owen Coté examines the military balance with regard to submarine warfare and offers some interesting ideas for competitive initiatives. His chapter also sets a high standard for operationally-focused strategic analysis that other scholars would do well (but may find difficult) to emulate. Similarly strong on operational detail, but considerably lighter on concrete recommendations, is the chapter by Michael Chase and Andrew Erickson on China's competitive advantage in missile forces. While their warning that "[t]he United States should avoid playing into Beijing's hands by investing disproportionately in technologies that could leave it on the wrong end of an arms race that might prove too costly [...] to wage" (216) is timely, one would wish that they would have devoted greater attention to the potential interactions between American and Chinese forces in this vital area of the competition.

Finally, Toshi Yoshihara and Ross Babbage explore the options available, respectively, to Japan and Australia for CS-like defence planning vis-à-vis China. According to the authors, both countries can and should do more to counter the Chinese build-up, both for the sake of their unilateral defence interests and by way of burden-sharing. The far-reaching initiatives they propose would, however, seem to depend on an internal political consensus in threat assessment that – despite mounting evidence of Chinese overreach – cannot be presupposed in either country.

Part Four of the book offers additional perspectives on the emerging rivalry in the Western Pacific and attempts to tackle some of the challenges involved in

formulating competitive strategies in a more explicit manner. The chapter by James Thomas and Evan Montgomery is notable primarily for advancing the notion that the PLA's current reliance on anti-access systems actually plays to America's advantage and should be further encouraged, because it prevents investments in longer-range power projection assets. With regard to China's future priorities and internal development, they believe that the US "might simply have to exercise patience while natural forces play themselves out" (268). Paul Giarra underscores the impact of military geography as a potential source of comparative advantage, but arguably takes historical analogy a bridge too far in his attempt at drawing direct parallels between the Fulda Gap and China's "maritime salient." James FitzSimonds concludes this final segment with some excellent observations on military-cultural inhibitions as an enduring challenge in executing competitive strategies – one that may well prove as intractable as the adversary itself.

Of the key themes that run through the material, which is unnecessarily repetitive at times, some are open to question and could have been treated in a more reflected manner. Thus, the utility and appropriateness of direct historical comparison between strategic rivalries past and present is not self-evident and should have been established in a more explicit fashion. Some of the contributions would also seem to significantly understate the complexity of the playing field and overstate the willingness of Asia-Pacific nations to engage in military balancing behaviour vis-à-vis China. Meanwhile, the insistence by some of the authors that the adoption of the CS paradigm would not form an impediment to US-China cooperation can only be interpreted as an instance either of intellectual dishonesty, or of considerable naiveté. Other themes, like the importance of shaping perceptions, and the prominence of psychological and cultural factors, are less controversial and may appeal even to those who disagree with some of the volume's core premises. The consistent emphasis on profound knowledge of the opponent and the need for strategic self-awareness is particularly sensible, even though not all of the contributions fully live up to these exhortations. As Mahnken himself indicates, the US academic and defence communities have a long way to go if they wish to gain the kind of deep familiarity with Beijing's strategic inclinations that was necessary to formulate viable competitive strategies vis-à-vis the Soviet Union.

Nonetheless, *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century* is an important resource for those who are trying to gain a deeper understanding of the competitive military dynamics that increasingly define Sino-American relations, and what the United States can do to shape this aspect of its future relationship with the People's Republic in its favour. Given the rising level of tensions in the South and East China Seas, the volume's basic approach has, if anything, become more topical and relevant in the two years that have elapsed between the initial NWC conference and its publication.

The book profits from its consistent focus on the CS paradigm, which proves to be an adequate device for structuring and narrowing down a very complex debate. At the same time, the strong emphasis on a specific way in strategic planning means that the contributors' appraisal of Sino-American relations remains partial and, overall, less differentiated than one would wish. The quality of the individual chapters is necessarily uneven, but with few exceptions conforms to high standards of policy-relevant analysis. Considering the rather technical nature of the material, most of the contributions are highly readable, even though they are intended more for the policy expert than for the general reader. Some chapters are heavy on acronyms and jargon, but – with the possible exception of Coté's otherwise excellent investigation of the undersea balance – not excessively so. Conspicuously absent is a chapter on the competitive value of the AirSea Battle doctrine currently being developed by the US Navy and Air Force, which is given short shrift, despite the fact that the debate about the concept's merits was already underway in 2010.

Given that it represents some of the more hard-line strands of Western thinking about the Sino-American competition and is strongly prescriptive in nature, *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century* should not be seen as a stand-alone resource for making sense of US-China relations. Readers who favour deep engagement with China will certainly find much to disagree with in these pages. Those who believe that some kind of confrontation between the East Asian hegemon and its prospective challenger is probably unavoidable, but should be pursued intelligently, will find that the CS paradigm has much to recommend itself. Apart from the ever-growing crowd of China watchers, the volume will also be of interest to students of US defence planning during the latter stages of the Cold War, and of the original Competitive Strategies Initiative in particular. Overall, *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century* is a solid – if

somewhat hidebound – treatment of an increasingly central subject in contemporary strategic studies.

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