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Book Review

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Thomas Mahnken, ed., *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History and Practice*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2012, 344 pp., \$29.95, ISBN-10: 0804782423, ISBN-13: 978-0804782425.

Strategic competition amongst dominant and rising powers has remained an unremitting cycle given the ever-changing contours of international relations. This in turn has invited animated analytical discourse amongst the theorists, scholars and practising professionals. Strategic competition has various attached dimensions, namely, political, diplomatic, economic and military. This volume, a compilation of essays by various authors, addresses the military strategic dimension of Sino-American relationship in an era of uncertainty and constraints that the United States currently faces.

The book has been divided into four sections. The first section addresses the theoretical and conceptual framework of devising competitive strategies. The second part deals with practical aspects of military strategic competition as was crafted and implemented against the Soviet Union during the latter part of the Cold War. The third section is devoted to the emerging contours of Sino-American military rivalry and the present and future trajectory of Chinese responses. The last section examines

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alternative strategic axioms for strategic competitiveness vis-à-vis the prevailing thought processes.

The editor in the introductory chapter defines the key strategic challenges to the United States as the threat from transnational terrorism, nuclear armed hostile regimes like North Korea and possible Iran and last, but not the least, the rising potential of China as a near-peer competitor that can have far-reaching ramifications for regional stability and the US-led alliance network. It is also averred that the Sino-American relationship would be the defining factor of global strategic interactions and the need for conceiving a comprehensive approach is vital for maintaining the present systemic order, particularly in the current era of resource constraints. He further goes on to stress that competitive strategies are quite different from the *conflictual context* and are aimed for peacetime transactions.

The next chapter, addresses the basic underpinnings of the competitive strategic approach devised the US Defense Department, its distinct characteristics and the environment under which such methodologies may be applied. Professor Rosen, however, balances the argument by providing a critique, wherein he questions the present framework by arguing that competitive strategies are not without the inherent dangers of provocation and possible escalation. The other objections offered are the overreliance on a policy that may change over time, the irrelevance of a mechanism largely predicated on game theory mechanics as well as the inadequacy to deal with the counterfactuals and bureaucratic perceptions. Certain other alternative approaches, such as socializing (transforming foes into friends), the Clausewitzian approach of comprehensive national persistence and resoluteness, and the Chinese *Shih* strategy have also been discussed.

The third chapter deals with correlating the theoretical context and historical perspectives for practical application. Professor Bradford Lee advocates that strategic competition can be equated with the concept of deterrence with its foundational posits residing in the eventual cost-benefit of action-reaction calculus. He expands the argument on the basis of two mega-concepts of rationality and interaction, with each of these having two further facets. The author proposes that Western strategic thought heavily reliant on Anglo-Saxon origins should focus on those that have served as the beacons for the adversaries, which in this case happen to be Sun Tzu and Mao, among others.

The last chapter of strategic framework by Professor Barry Watts, aptly titled "Barriers to Acting Strategically" dissects the complications and limitations of not only

evolving a cogent strategy, but the more difficult part of translating it into action. These primarily stem from the different notions of strategy per se by the stakeholders. The other factors that impinge are the essentially predictive nature and linked uncertainty of strategies, nebulous and convoluted mix inherent in strategic problems, constraining effects of finite resources, human fallibility, equating goals (outcomes) to strategies (approach) and, of course, insufficient effort in implementation.

The first paper in the second section, authored by Gordon Barrass, deals with the practice of strategic competition by the United States against the Soviet Union during the Cold War period. The important facets and various phases of competition during this period have been historically treated beginning with the concept of massive retaliation, seminal event of Cuban Missile crisis and the developments thereafter that served as the kernel for devising a competitive framework. The major developments in the successive administrations have been documented and the author opines that sustained military strategic pressure, technology ascendancy backed by astute political manoeuvres that bought about the Soviet strategic overstretch.

The sixth article in the book by Daniel Goure provides an overview of the competitive strategic initiative by highlighting the important work done by Andrew Marshall of the Office of Net Assessment (ONA). The translation from mere assessment to formulation of executable strategic action is thereafter delineated by a discursive debate on the definitions and foundational tenets, and the dialectic that exists between large commercial and national strategic competitive outlooks. One of the major outcomes of competitive strategies was the evolution of dissuasion approach that addressed a wider deterrence–defence–security construct.

The second section ends by a discourse on the Soviet military thought by John Battilega, a defence intelligence analyst. The author puts across a hypothesis that the US Competitive Strategy programme did succeed on the politico-military plane and had cross-cutting effects on the strategic, operational and tactical levels. In addition, the key elements of Soviet military art and operational scheme have been delineated, like the division of globe into distinct theatres with further sub-divisions into smaller and service specific compartments that tended to constrain a holistic appraisal of military imperatives. The author has described the core Soviet vulnerabilities where the asymmetric advantages in terms of operational scheme, technology superiority and military capabilities were applied.

The third part of book starts with an essay by James Holmes that concentrates on the primacy of maritime (not exclusively naval) context within the Sino-US

competitive approaches. The author stresses that the competition will be driven by the principle of access and makes an interesting observation that while the competitive strategic approach is peacetime centric, the defining limits of peace and war are permeable. The historical trends, increasing maritime orientation of China and the recent developments as part of military modernization have been analysed in the overall context. The vulnerabilities and strengths of China and the USA have been dissected and its impact on involved third parties like the formal allies, perceived partners and other swing states has been touched upon.

The next chapter by Jacqueline Deal, a defence and strategic analyst commences by a delineation of the radically different strategic goals of the USA and China in the current environment established on structural and cultural divergences. The author draws upon history, the changing perceptions about power and the dynamics of policy formulation in contemporary China with its predilection for the *three-warfare theory* to portray a mostly conflictual picture of Sino-US strategic transactions.

The next three chapters are military–strategic in nature and address the key issues of power projection, undersea warfare and ballistic missile technologies. Power projection has, for long, been a pillar of US naval strategic thought as far as conventional deterrence is concerned. Chinese development of disruptive capabilities, now clubbed under the acronym Anti Access Area Denial (A2AD) have been analysed for their effect on regional security architecture. The undersea or underwater warfare has emerged as key area of Chinese naval modernization and, given its cross-cutting and long-range effects, this issue has been discussed in order to draw out a preliminary equation as it obtains today and the future prospects. The advances made by the Chinese to develop improved ballistic missiles capabilities to offset the traditional US strength has been discussed with an analysis of the recent programmes, the change in Chinese views about use of ballistic capability in conventional scenarios and its implication for US posture.

The fourth and the last section of the volume starts with an essay that advocates a significant realignment of the current US policies by taking a long-term view of economic, military and strategic trends instead of focussing on near-term contingencies. The authors assess that bolstering the US regional posture, enhancing the capabilities of allies and like-minded partners as well as by exploiting opportunities arising out of Chinese internal dynamics offers a better prospect. The next chapter focuses on the maritime salience of US–China competition by emphasizing the debilitating consequences for American interests unless a credible and convincing

approach is formulated. The next paper focuses on the changes that are needed in the cultural dynamics of military organizations. The author, James Fitzsimonds, argues that new competitors require a radical reset of strategic outlook and needs to be matched by the development of military technologies and operational concepts that provide discrete technological ascendancy for an overall favourable cost–benefit exchange.

The book concludes by arguing that the Sino-American competitiveness is likely to deepen and urgently requires the development of a holistic strategic response to maintain the current systemic order. Further, past precedents exist of devising such policy frameworks, which need to be tailored to the changed environment.

An overall impression that one derives from the work is that China is no longer a rising power but has emerged as serious contender for global order ordained on the premise of US primacy. The book provides a useful insight, albeit Western in its orientation, into the military–strategic contours of this complex, convoluted and sometimes confusing bilateral relationship. As far as the Indian readership is concerned, the book contains some useful nuggets for policy formulation with one stark difference. While Sino-US competitive relationship is based on antagonistic peer relationship on a global scale, the arc of Sino-Indian relationship would remain underpinned by the significant difference in the politico-strategic, economic and military quotients. It is considered that book has special relevance for scholars and practitioners dealing with security, strategic and international affairs, and not in the least by the China watchers. Of particular appeal to the scholar-warriors are the first and the last sections dealing with intellectual and military–strategic issues towards developing a cogent long-term view of international security dynamics.