**Finding the Strategic Equilibrium**

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May 31, 2023

China is going to experience an increase in national socioeconomic and public health concerns in 2023. If history is any guide, it is reasonable to anticipate China’s leaders to respond to settle their external environment to focus on domestic concerns. To counteract criticism of their political record, they will try to project to their people the image of being treated with dignity and respect overseas. Such symbolism will be especially important in the US-China strategic completion. How China’s leaders are considered capable to manage competitive relations with the US is frequently an indicator of how their achievement is evaluated at home. Even while the general competitive architecture of the US-China relationship is not going to change, opportunities for the US to achieve discrete affirmative agendas with China may emerge in the next year.

However, there is no simple solution. While the competition may resemble classic great power rivalry, there are significant differences. Parables such as a “new Cold War” are deceptive. America’s foe was the Soviet Union while China is its competitor. The USSR was an economically weak country with minimal international participation but China is a powerful economy with a global presence. During the Cold War, countries were either aligned or nonaligned. Presently, nations maintain overlapping and fluctuating alliances. However, a new global order has not yet arisen. We are in a transition that is influenced not solely by the US-China competition, but also by Russian aggressiveness, Europe’s desire for autonomy, and middle-power ambitions. There are no longer holy foreign policy taboos. This rush for a leading role in the emerging world order is producing international volatility and concern among countries, like Pakistan, which lacks the power to control the global environment but is vulnerable enough to be affected by it.

The US-China rivalry has had formidable consequences for Pakistan. Great Power confrontation has gone a long way since the non-nuclear weapons humanity participated in unrestrained global warfare. Along with nuclear weapons came the threat of mutually assured destruction, which has kept wars at bay, at least among the major nations. And, in this age of globalization and socioeconomic interconnectedness, the prospect of the mutually guaranteed collapse of the world’s economic system has increased the cost of even minor Great Power confrontation. It is no surprise that Washington tries to keep its competition with China in check. Speaking recently at the Stimson Centre, US Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns stated that “we’re ready to talk” and hoped that China would “meet us halfway.” In recent addresses, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan claimed that the limitations imposed on advanced semiconductor shipments to China were tightly focused and designed primarily to address national security concerns. “We are not cutting off trade,” Sullivan stated.

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The US-China rivalry is primarily two-tiered, with the first intended at retaining America’s intellectual and military superiority, and the second aimed at assuring that both sides are equal in economic competitiveness. To preserve its technical and military superiority, the United States does not need to go to war. It does so by denying advanced technology, particularly that which could hinder China’s capacity to grow in AI and military technology.

The conflict between the United States and China may be all-encompassing, but at its heart is economic competition. Washington is concerned about China’s worldwide economic expansion and forceful military stance in the region. China has a geoeconomic advantage, while America has a geopolitical and military might advantage. The US has developed geopolitical alliances that involve AUKUS (Australia-UK-US) and QUAD (Australia-Japan-India-US), as well as the Indo-Pacific Strategy, to develop adequate military influence to make sure China cannot beat the US out in economic competitiveness. They are deterrents, much like the tensions over Taiwan, which has become a strategic advantage for Washington in the event of a military clash with China.

What effect will all of this have on Pakistan? Our strategic engagement with China is critical, but not sufficient, in addressing our security and economic issues. We also require the United States, a significant bilateral economic partner, and a dependable security provider in the past. Washington has been unpredictable, but given our few alternatives, it remains relevant to Pakistan’s requirements. Regardless, an allied America can attack Pakistan directly or indirectly through India.

Pakistan is important to Washington both as a regional security partner and as a spoiler in the response to Afghanistan geopolitical conflict. Pakistan will not be compelled to choose between the US and China if it achieves Washington’s objectives without jeopardizing its interests. However, if the economic balance becomes unduly skewed in China’s favour, the US-China rivalry might devolve into a virtual “hand-to-hand fight.”

Finally, China will be among several critical issues that the Biden administration will face in the coming year. The White House might be in a better position to manage its numerous challenges, such as the pandemic, massive immigration, global recession, warming temperatures, Ukraine, shortages of food and energy, and North Korea and Iran’s nuclear ambitions if it could situate China within an assortment of global challenges that must be addressed. This does not imply giving China a pass or giving in on sensitive topics like Taiwan, science and technology, or rights for humans. America must continue to protect its interests and the ideals it values with its closest allies.

Finally, the United States and China have been involved in a long-term struggle to decide which governance style can best solve global challenges and improve citizens’ lives. Power perceptions will be influenced by performance. America is at its best when it works to improve its situation and rally global efforts to address common concerns, rather than when it is distracted by confrontation with an aspirational but limited power.

Islamabad, particularly if it is no longer required by Washington and is also regarded as assisting China in undermining critical US economic or political objectives, such as the strategic use of Gwadar by Beijing, may be forced to choose by the US, or by China.

Pakistan, like most of the rest of the globe, is concerned about how the escalating US-China competition would affect its relationships with both countries.

Pakistan should strengthen internally so that neither US nor Beijing can afford to lose it. A weak Pakistan needs to have both and be continually concerned about having to choose one day.

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