

Great Power Rivalry in an Evolving International Order

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Abstract—History is testimony to the fact that at any juncture, the Geopolitical landscape is fraught with various shades of contestations and alliances with a sole underlying motive - a nation's own territorial and security dynamics manifesting as its National Interests. Since National Interests are inherently dynamic, and constantly evolving over time, so is the complex web of Geopolitics among nations. It is interesting to study what causes this dynamism in National Interests- Is it intrinsic to the nation itself or is affected by Great Power rivalry which, in turn, become the driver for National Security Strategies for these Great Powers, emerging ones and the rest of the world. As we witness in the world today, US hegemony is waning, and the rise of a multipolar world is beckoning a power restructuring on the global stage. The rivalry between China and the US seems to be intensifying which is likely to escalate in the coming years. The 'Special Operations' in Ukraine by Russia are also likely to have considerable effects on geopolitics in ways that are not yet clear. This article attempts to shed light on certain fundamental aspects of Great Powers, Competition Vs Rivalry, Outcomes of a Rivalry and finally, the Imperatives for India.

Index Terms—Competition, Geopolitics, Great Powers, Implications for India, Rivalry

I. INTRODUCTION

The rise and fall of powers is a continuous phenomenon, but surely, the Geopolitics of the world we see in contemporary times are unprecedented in history. We are entering a new era of world history, with more than two centuries of dominance by the western powers being 'dramatically' replaced by eastern nations on the rise. 'Dramatic' because not even one European power, once the harbingers of economic clout, industrial prowess and literally dividing the rest of the whole world amongst themselves as colonies, is in the top four world economies in terms of Purchasing Power Parity. The age of disruption has arrived.

Closer home, the regions of Central and South Asia are increasingly becoming theatres for geostrategic contest. This contest termed the "Great Power Competition", resonates with the Great Game of the nineteenth century. These Great Powers vie for

influence, resources, and interests. Before we examine the nuances of this topic, it is imperative to dwell upon the meaning of two concepts that form its core: Great Power and Rivalry.

II. GREAT POWER

A common and reasonably accurate understanding of the concept is the group of countries acknowledged as great powers, have a predominant influence on the process of international relations. Another definition, according to Gilpin, is those nations historically called the great powers, and in today's parlance, known as the superpowers, establish and enforce the basic rules and rights that influence their behaviour and that of the lesser states in the system. (Gilpin, 1981). Most scholars in the field assume that a set of countries qualify to be called Great powers if they wield a more significant effect on world politics than the rest combined. However, despite the diverse opinions, there is general agreement as to who the great powers of a given era were, albeit a doubt about some other contenders. Reasonable clarity emerges when some scholars have tried to quantify Great Powers in terms of objective criteria viz. Consensus and Capabilities. In the international relations literature, two main criteria emerge.

As regards consensus it is indicative of the fact that everyone agrees some nations were Great Powers for a given period. Martin Wight recons that rather than defining the term, enumerating the great powers at any date is the better option, "for there is always broad agreement about the existing great powers". He defines a dominant (or Great) power as one that can confidently contemplate war against any individual or a likely combination of other powers. (Wight, Power Politics, 1978) . Organski and Kugler, in their attempt to explain why major wars occur, also use several definitions to identify states as major powers whilst concluding that international relations specialists have consensus on their identity". (Kugler, 1980)

As regards the aspect of capabilities that make a Great Power, Waltz articulated that states could be evaluated based on their score on capabilities such as the size of population and territory, natural resources endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence (Waltz, 1993). In addition, Martin Wight, in his work, "The power that makes a 'power'", includes "strategic position including geographical extent, economic resources and industrial production" to this list. On similar lines, David Singer and his associates have attempted a framework designed to measure three constructs in the Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) viz demographic, military, and economic capabilities, which are assumed to assess national power (Singer, 1993). Further, in his book, "World Politics" (Organski, 1968) has attempted an initial consideration of six determinants of national power viz. Geographical size, Population size, Economic capability, Political capability, Natural Resources and National Morale, wherein he demonstrates that "Geographical size does not correlate with power".

III. COMPETITION VS RIVALRY

Next, let us deal with the question of what a rivalry is? Dictionaries usually use the terms Competition and Rivalry as synonyms, whilst literature on these aspects often uses the two terms interchangeably, but do they indeed point to the same concept? If it were true, from the perceptions of an individual, an Organisation and even a Nation-state, we all live in a competitive scenario, then shouldn't we all be rivals? For example, the Merriam-Webster dictionary puts competition, conflict, confrontation, combat, strife, duel, match, war and warfare as synonyms for rivalry. Both symbolise a contest among opponents for a coveted prize or honour. However, in their literal and narrow sense, the words competition and rivalry separately imply specific attitudes and behaviours, which have profound implications for all who covet the same honorary status.

Rivalry is a fundamental word whose very sound indicates turbulence. More commonly used than its synonym, competition indicates overwhelming ambition and uncontrolled emotions. Competition can be as intense, arduous, stressful and aggressive as rivalry. However, competition is positive, unlike the latter, which bristles with negativity. As we shall discuss later in this article, from a Geo-politics perspective, competition is the umbrella term

encapsulating the concept of rivalry as a particular case. Hence, to understand rivalry in the Geopolitical context, we must first understand competition.

IV. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF COMPETITION

International Relations Theory. The overarching theory in this context is the International Relations (IR) Theory which helps us understand how states interact and view the world in an international system. The IR theory guides governments on issues concerning international politics and concerns by diplomats. Out of the five prominent theories of international relations, realism is a pragmatic approach to international relations in which all nations strive to increase their power and the nations that can store their power most efficiently thrive. This theory states that the nation's primary interest should be self-preservation and that the continued rise to power should always be a social, economic, and political imperative, which begets a fundamental need amongst nations to compete.

Defining Great Power Competition. After devolving in reasonable detail with the terms Great Power and Competition, let us unravel the conjoined term Great Power Competition. Existing research on this concept suggests that the presence of three essential elements can generally define competition in the international arena. First, there must be measurable or perceived competition (that is, participants must see each other as competitive). Second, opponents must seek to consolidate power and status with each other. Furthermore, third, the issues the participants discuss should be specific or otherwise noteworthy. Accordingly, a general definition of competition has been put forward as "the attempt to gain an advantage, often over others who are viewed as a challenge or threat, through the selfish pursuit of contested assets such as power, security, wealth, Influence and Status" (Mazzar, Understanding Competition, 2022).

V. TYPES OF GREAT POWER COMPETITION

A fundamental reality is that countries compete in a variety of ways for an equal variety of ambitions. How they do it, what goals they choose, and what mix of tools they put together to achieve those goals is a matter of strategy. The first and most crucial challenge for any country is to understand the nature of the sport in which it participates and not to confuse it with sports that vary wildly in

type, scope or intensity. Scholars evaluating the nature of world politics identify at least four significant levels or types of competition, as discussed below (Mazzar, Understanding Competition, 2022).

- An environment of Generalised Competition. In this most general sense, nations compete, though not always over issues that manifest into national security threats. A helpful difference from the literature is that between nations seeking absolute and relative gain. When states seek to improve their position in non-zero-sum areas such as economic power, many can do so simultaneously without intense competition at the state-to-state level. This may manifest in form of temporal and dynamic alliances, Long-term regional blocs (as in the European Union), Centuries-long friendships and organised systems of trade, finance or common issues (like piracy, climate change, terrorism) and they sometimes band together to pursue normative goals, as in humanitarian relief efforts (Mazzar, Understanding Competition, 2022). Smaller and medium powers support rule-based order, which provides predictability to world politics. The generic term competition, therefore, describes the mandate of world politics.

- Bilateral Rivalries. A rivalry is a particularly fierce competition, usually involving relatively equal states, most often vying for a regional or global advantage. History testifies that there have been conflicts between the established powers as well as during transition of power. Heath's detailed assessment summarises several other critical aspects of international rivalries. (Heath Timothy, 2022). These include the following as per Leonid Savin (Savin, 2022):

- Some rivalries are characterised predominantly by contests over territories or sovereignty, whilst others over control like "issues of status, influence, and hierarchy in a given order or system".

- The risk of a "proliferation of intractable dispute issues". Rivalries, over time, can provoke disputes on many issues, creating a vicious cycle of hostility.

- A "destabilising arms race". Rivalries often end-up promoting mutual build-up of the rivals' militaries, leading to heightened threat

perceptions and thus an overall increase in the risk of war.

- A constant risk of "militarised disputes". Rivalries are often characterised by a history of arms conflict and a persistent risk of crises that threaten to spill into war.

- Militarised Disputes. Even though bilateral rivalries encompass some measure of security confrontation, not all great powers are likely to engage in militarised disputes, the third type of competition. "What is usually needed is some kind of aggressive state, dissatisfied with its position and willing to take large-scale military action to restore the balance." Scholars sometimes refer to this form of the militarised aggressor as a "revisionist" state (Mazzar, Understanding Competition, 2022). Global political research has identified particularly antagonistic states that use "armies as instruments of statecraft", often intending to conquer and subdue neighbours or even distant peoples, like Germany and Japan in the 1930s. Scholars often compare this military aggressiveness to the emerging military ambitions of China or Russia. Russia today, of course, is closer to that category though it does not represent the full-scale threat of invasion and conquest from earlier militarist revisionists. China, demonstrating significant territorial ambitions in littoral states of the East and South China Sea along with Taiwan seems determined to wean the balance of power away from the United States. However, China also remains a constrained revisionist and appears reluctant to threaten a full-scale military adventure across the region. (Mead, 2014).

- Organised Campaigns of Actions Short of War. Of late, in the ongoing discourse on national security and defence policies of nations, when people refer to competition, they often mean specifically the use of tools of statecraft to gain an advantage below the threshold of a major war (Mazzar, Understanding Competition, 2022). Competition, in essence, translates to means other than war. This view of competition is not necessarily mutually exclusive from any of the others presented above. A great power can, and almost always will, undertake general international competition, discrete bilateral rivalries, and even more aggressive militarised forms of rivalry using tools and techniques short of war (Brands, 2022). An inherent component of all competition between nation-states is to seek advantage in grey zone

contest. Michael J Mazzar and similar work at RAND have documented this grey zone competition's elements, including economic, diplomatic, informational, and covert intelligence (Mazzar, Understanding Competition, 2022). Manifestations of these by China are economic leverage over other Asian nations, widespread cyber intrusions with the potential to achieve destructive effects in war and use of training missions and rotational deployments to gain intelligence on potential conflict areas.

VI. KEY FACTORS IN UNDERSTANDING THE CHARACTER OF A RIVALRY

Let us now bring our focus back to the second type of competition, i.e. rivalry. Although there is a manifestation of a generalised competition spanning the globe, the United States, Russia and China are engaged in a classic rivalry. These rivalries are not yet fully militarised, nor do they need to be. Let us dive deeper into understanding the nature of a rivalry within the broad umbrella term of competition.

- The first question is about what essentially is the rivalry. Historically, rivalries have focused on spatial factors, such as the dominance of a landmass. Apart from spatial factors, the rivalry could be about Ideological factors (Russia during the cold war focussed on the spread of communism). In addition, some scholars purport that Technological Competition could be at the centre of the rivalry between States(eg. US-China) whilst others suggest that the rivalry may focus on the desire to gain dominant influence over critical rules, norms and institutions of international politics (Mazarr, 2020).
- Another crucial question concerns what the major powers want in a competition. Whether they have aggressive intentions to dominate world politics or are they striving for regional hegemony? Are they after economic power or military power? The goals of almost every significant power in history are slightly different. In other words, each competition has its flavour.
- A third crucial question concerns with, how can we define success in the competition.

Britain's success in competing with France did not mandate the occupation of France. By contrast, during the Cold War, a significant softening of the Soviet system, if not its complete collapse, could be considered truly successful for the United States. Therefore, success in general competition or rivalry does not require success in all minor battles, wars, or competitions.

- A fourth pertinent question seeks determine as to What is the degree of intensity of the rivalry? This aspect could be quantified by indicators such as “violent conflicts, the level of publicly expressed mutual resentment, and the level of hostile nationalism on one or both sides” (Mazzar, Understanding Competition, 2022). A bilateral rivalry could be considered high-intensity when both sides are willing to take potentially violent measures.
- A fifth characteristic asks, how stable the rivalry is? In a stable rivalry, the rivals rarely go to war, even though they may perceptions of a bitter rivalry exist. “A rivalry can be intense yet remain stable, with a tendency to recover from crises and not escalate to war” (Murphy, 2017). This brings us to a discussion on the Stability of a Rivalry.

Outcomes of a Rivalry

As evidenced by the above, two fundamental factors are purported to determine the outcome of any significant rivalry. Firstly, the “domestic dynamism and vitality” of the competitors and secondly, the extent to which their “societies become drivers of any existential competitive advantage”, including economic and technological. (Mazzar, Understanding Competition, 2022). In this parlance, therefore, the notion of success and failure emanates from a “contest of societies rather than a series of individual clashes.” Another important factor is maintaining a favourable international balance of power and alignment. “Nations that can shape the surrounding geopolitical context and larger socioeconomic environment gain a tremendous competitive advantage”. (Mazzar, Understanding Competition, 2022).

VII. IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

Historically, the transition of great power status has brought about disruptive changes in the economic, security and technology control regimes at the global and regional levels. With the increase in globalisation in recent times, there are systemic and deep interdependencies among all states. Hence, limiting the study of great power competition to merely US-China-Russia interactions would be a dangerous oversimplification but would need to be studied in the context of its impact at the global and regional levels. An essential dimension of great power competition is the role and status of middle or small powers. A case in point is the increased purchase of Russian oil by India recently, which was viewed as an affront by the US. Smaller powers can also play pivotal roles in great power competition by virtue of their geopolitical or geo-economic position.

It is reasonable to predict that in the next decade there would be a spike in US-China rivalry since no power would give up its No 1 status easily. So where does a nation stand in this impending upheaval? Does it look after its own interests (maybe calling for aligning with China) or does it try to counterbalance China in favour of existing, USA-centred, global governance architecture? Or is there a middle path? The choice is not easy but has to be made realistically.

Aligning these choices in the theoretical domain of realism, the literature on realism's structural theories brings out possible Strategic Options for a smaller state as a revisionist emerging power increases its regional assertiveness. These choices rather than purely black or white, can be viewed on a continuum of Balancing and Bandwagoning for profit on two extremes with hedging in between.

We must consider this US-China contestation as India's Greatest Opportunity, a proverbial second chance at the tide we missed, by opening up to global economic competition whilst attempting to bridge the wide gap in our potential and performance hitherto fore. There are broadly two choices- an unprecedented military capacity building vs enhancing the size and influence of our consumer markets. The sooner we realise that the key dimension of this emerging Great power rivalry is not military, but economic we would stand to benefit multifold. India is fortunate that the new "Great Game" will be played predominantly in

the Economic Sphere. Hence the following is suggested from India's perspective:

At the global level, we must broadly consider the following, within the plethora of available choices and geopolitical strategies:-

Firstly, resist the temptation to join on the 'Deep State' of Washington to blindly Counterbalance China, already manifesting in our joining the QUAD. It is pertinent to ask whether is it really making us Independent & Neutral or are we slowly sliding into being a Quasi Ally of the US. And if we think this is the right choice we need to answer a harder question- QUAD is not NATO to come to our rescue and neither is the US the same confident superpower of the 1980s.

Secondly, we must continue to diplomatically stake a claim for UNSC with veto powers, with our claim substantiated with economic clout, since at the end of the day only one statistic counts- the GNP.

Thirdly, taking the liberty of quoting certain takeaways from Dr S Jaishankar's book, "The India Way- Strategies for an uncertain world"(Jaishankar, 2020). Three interesting principles that shape the "Jaishankar Doctrine" in the book are: -

- o Avoid 'confining' alliances – An example of this aspect is stated by the author as "If India drove the revived QUAD arrangement, it also took membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. A longstanding trilateral with Russia and China now coexists with one involving the US and Japan" (p. 14).

- o Exploit conflicts inherent in the multipolar world - Dr Jaishankar suggests our strategies must be aligned towards pragmatism, in fact, going beyond towards opportunism whilst commenting, "In the 'transactional bazaar' (p. 39) that the concert of nations has become, India must maximize its interests, guided unashamedly by the mantra of advancing [its] national interests by identifying and exploiting opportunities created by global contradictions" (p. 11). He suggests that Plurilateralism i.e. engaging with competing powers like the US, China, the EU or Russia at the same time, is seen as a power politics, "a way of asserting itself on the world stage: the world is today required to come to terms with this changing India" (p. 17).

o Accept the contradictions that result – This, he elaborates further by commenting that, “a parallel pursuit of multiple priorities, some of whom could be contradictory” (p. 16). Jaishankar, in fact, mocks those who do not understand that Indian initiatives that seem “unnatural are the hallmark of the new Indian way”. However, a critical assumption here is that India has become so indispensable on an international scene marked by extreme fluidity that its partners will not be offended if it also deals with some of their adversaries.

And lastly, at the regional level, it is pertinent to look at our South East Asian Neighbours to explore the linkages between their Domestic Politics and their Foreign Policies in the backdrop of Great Power Rivalries. Now is a second chance to reverse a rather catastrophic Geo-political decision of not only joining but steering mutually beneficial regional security and economic partnerships like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RECP) led by ASEAN.

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