

Geopolitics and Strategic Competition

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This lecture provides the big picture of today's geopolitical landscape with a focus on the largest vortex in the environment—the superpower rivalry between China and the United States. The most consequential elements of a geopolitical landscape are the strategic competition and strategic cooperation among its big and middle powers. Four major features characterize the current geopolitical landscape in the Indo-Pacific region:

- The centrality of the US-China strategic competition;
- The emergence of an alliance of major regional powers that excludes China—the Quad;
- The conflict between two kinds of international order—a rules-based order and a hierarchical order; and
- The effort of many regional states to preserve their autonomy, broaden their options, and engage with opposite sides of the strategic competition.

The superpower rivalry between the United States and China is but the latest instance of a recurrent theme in history. Whenever there are more than one great power in an international system, there is great power competition. The contest between China and the United States revolves around two main questions:

- What will be the basis of the normative international order?
- Who will have more influence on the international order and the actors in the international system?

Unlike most of the past instances of great power competition, the contest between the United States and China is unlikely to lead to a direct war between the two great powers because the deterrence of a nuclear holocaust works in both directions. Efforts to avoid a nuclear war between the two superpowers will save humanity from a third world war, but their strategic contest will last for several decades and manifest itself in various forms of “war by other means,” including but not limited to economic warfare, cyberwarfare, information warfare, psychological warfare, and political warfare. This aspect of the US-China rivalry is reminiscent of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, the first great power competition in the nuclear age. However, today's great power competition is different from the Cold War in many important aspects. Chief among these aspects are four.

First, the economies of China and the United States are, directly and indirectly through a third country, so intertwined that a complete decoupling is impossible even in the long term. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the severe vulnerability this economic interdependence has caused to both countries. As result, an important part of their strategic competition involves the restructuring of the supply chains and investment flows, both to reduce this vulnerability and to weaponize it.

Second, the cyberspace, which did not exist in the previous global contests, has become an indispensable domain of human activities, societal life, and international relations. Data, the digital building blocks of the cyber domain, are now the most precious resource in the world economy. Technologies relying on the cyber domain are revolutionizing social life and the global economy. A

lifeline during the COVID-19 pandemic, the cyber domain is also a central arena of great power competition in our time.

Third, the central frontline of the US-China strategic contest runs across the maritime domain of the Western Pacific and Eastern Indian Ocean, which are home to the critical sea routes that connect some of the most productive areas on Earth. This maritime nature of its frontline makes the US-China rivalry geostrategically different from the Cold War, whose frontline cut across the land domain of Central Europe. Today's superpower rivalry, therefore, may be less stable than the Cold War, while Southeast Asia is right at the center of great power contest, not at the fringe of it as in the Cold War.

Fourth and most important normatively, while the United States advocates an international order based on liberal rules, China is trying to nudge others to accept its supreme position in a hierarchical order in exchange for economic and regime security benefits. By contrast, the Soviet Union's offer during the Cold War was an international order based on socialist solidarity, which soon cracked under the weight of the Sino-Soviet split and eventually crumbled under the pressure of a liberal order led by the United States. Today as in the Cold War, the responses of populations, both inside and between the two superpowers, will decide the outcome of their contest.