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Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin

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Neo-Primacy and the Pitfalls of US Strategy toward China

Over the last half decade, a bipartisan consensus has emerged in US foreign policy circles calling for sustained competition with China. The ostensible goals of this competition are to protect the extant international order, block Chinese regional hegemony, and defend American allies—all of which notionally require major changes in US grand strategy.¹ Gone is the assumption that the US victory in the Cold War gives it an opportunity to use economic and institutional interdependence to structure international politics in its favor while combating such ills as ethnic violence and terrorism; in vogue is the argument that the United States faces a near-peer great power competitor seeking to challenge the “liberal international order” nominally fostered by the United States since 1945.² In keeping with this drive to “compete” with Beijing, the United States is now accelerating efforts to militarily counterbalance Beijing, block Chinese economic and political influence in Asia and beyond, and pressure states to pick a side in the emerging US-China contest.³

Still, the new call for competition obscures more than it reveals. At its root, competition is not a strategy.⁴ It says little about the links between particular tools of statecraft and underlying US political objectives. This is understandable, for the simple reason that “competition” itself is not really the United States’ strategic response to China’s emergence as a great power. Instead, underlying and embedded in the new competition consensus is a nascent grand strategy I term “neo-primacy.”

Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson is Assistant Professor of International Relations at Boston University. He can be reached at jris@bu.edu or followed on Twitter @shifrinson. For help on earlier drafts, the author would like to thank Robert Jervis, David Edelstein, Jasen Castillo, and John Schuessler.

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The United States' original primacy strategy, of course, emerged after the Cold War as a way to extend the United States' run as the sole and uncontested superpower in the international system, sustaining its unipolar era by blocking the emergence of new peer competitors.⁵ Proponents of neo-primacy, in contrast, argue that China's rise to date already imperils unipolarity—at minimum putting the US lead under duress and at maximum having already ended the period of US predominance—while promising additional US relative losses in the future. As such, the strategy calls for the United States to compete with China in order to reclaim US dominance in world politics by reversing current trends in the distribution of power, bolstering existing US strengths where possible, and undercutting China's gains where necessary. Gone is classic primacy's optimistic take that US preeminence would last indefinitely; in vogue is a call for a direct contest to regain US leads.

Uniting members of the Trump administration and many analysts in think tanks and academia, the result—so the argument goes—would buttress America's contested leadership in international affairs while affording Washington options to check Chinese geopolitical ambitions. Or as Jake Sullivan, former national security advisor to then-Vice President Joseph Biden, and strategist Hal Brands argue in an apt crystallization of the logic, “signs that China is gearing up to contest America's global leadership are unmistakable,” requiring sustained investments in military power, diplomacy, and economics to ensure that the United States “more than hold[s] its own” in competition with Beijing.⁶ Baldly stated, lurking beneath calls for competition is an approach looking to arrest China's challenge to US preeminence and reconstitute the sorts of geopolitical advantages enjoyed immediately after the Cold War.⁷

Washington's quick embrace of neo-primacy has thus far gone unanalyzed

Despite neo-primacy's bipartisan appeal and stark implications for US national security, however, Washington's quick embrace of neo-primacy has thus far gone unanalyzed by strategists, scholars, or practitioners. This absence is problematic in two ways. First, it raises the possibility of the United States stumbling into a particular kind of great power contest with the underlying assumptions, merits, and drawbacks of the strategy under-

analyzed. Second, and even if competition between the United States and China is inevitable, the quick and unremarked embrace of a specific approach toward competition can obscure and block consideration of alternate strategies that may better suit US interests.

This article fills the gap by examining the logic of neo-primacy and its prospective costs and benefits to the United States. Despite its widespread appeal, I argue

that neo-primacy carries significant risks for US national security. Neo-primacy is a highly aggressive strategy that, paradoxically, risks transforming the United States into a major challenger to the status quo if not a revisionist power in its own right—it makes the United States itself a threat to international security in ways that could both increase the likelihood of conflict with Beijing and deprive the United States of other states' assistance. As importantly, the strategy contains internal contradictions that may undercut the United States' ability to implement the approach. A wiser course would instead recognize that China's emergence as a peer competitor primarily threatens important but non-vital US interests, affording the United States significant latitude and flexibility in deciding how to react.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. I first discuss the general relationship between threats and grand strategy. Using this framework, I briefly review the United States' original embrace of grand strategic primacy—an effort to block the emergence of peer competitors—after the Cold War and the consequences this shift held for US policy toward China. From there, I discuss the rise of *neo*-primacy today while highlighting the different investment priorities and tools neo-primacy uses to pursue the strategy. I then identify potential pitfalls to the strategy before concluding with a brief discussion of alternate principles to help guide competition with China.

Threats and Grand Strategy

Grand strategy refers to a state's theory on how to obtain security for itself in a competitive international system by linking the ends it seeks with the tools at its disposal.⁸ Engaging in such a task is no mean feat. At the most general level, policymakers need to specify and prioritize what sorts of outcomes will best protect a state's economic and military well-being; identify, analyze, and prioritize threats to these outcomes; and allocate resources and obtain tools linked to the ends sought and threats at hand. Furthermore, because international conditions often evolve, this entire process of relating ends, means, and threats must be regularly reassessed.⁹

The threats a state faces play an outsized role in shaping strategy.¹⁰ Absent external challenges, states' ability to advance their security is limited only by the resources at hand. With threats present, however, strategy becomes more complex: not only can threats impede acquisition of ends sought, but the resulting competition can be resource-intensive and raise the possibility of international conflict. Great power threats—what some policymakers in the United States call “peer competitors”—are especially challenging.¹¹ By virtue of their significant economic and military capabilities, great power threats tend to

require other states to work harder and spend more to promote their objectives, even as the prospect of a particularly costly war may make states particularly attentive to the risks involved.¹² Perhaps unsurprisingly, grand strategy can

The larger the threat, the more a state's grand strategy may fixate on it

thus end up focused as much on stopping or overcoming threats to the ends one seeks as on securing the objectives themselves. Put differently, the larger the threat, the more a state's grand strategy may fixate on the threat as the crux of its grand strategy.

American grand strategy during the Cold War exemplifies the trend. As the historian John Lewis Gaddis shows, containment of the Soviet Union—rightly identified as the only real threat confronting the postwar United States—quickly morphed from an effort to limit the expansion of Soviet power into key geopolitical regions such as Europe into a broader effort to arrest any Soviet expansion even in areas of marginal strategic importance.¹³ Nor is the United States' Cold War behavior unique. French policymakers after 1871, for example, treated a powerful and proximate Germany as the focal point of French strategy, just as German strategy fixed on the Russian/Soviet threat as Russian/Soviet power expanded in the early 20th century.¹⁴

After the Cold War: Grand Strategic Primacy and Hedging China

The preceding framework helps explain both the evolution of US grand strategy after the Cold War and its particular policies toward China. Following the Soviet collapse, the United States was the world's sole superpower. Recognizing the uniquely privileged position in which the country found itself, US policymakers fixed on the idea of extending the United States' "unipolar moment"¹⁵ by embracing a grand strategy of primacy. Easily caricatured, primacy held that the United States could and should exert sufficient control over international affairs that prospective peer competitors (identified in the early to mid-1990s as the nascent European Union, Japan, Russia, and China) would be kept from developing as peer or near-peer challengers to US power and influence. The effort would not only keep unipolarity going, but further minimize uncertainty over which actors could imperil US national security in ways that might prime international politics for crises and conflict.¹⁶

To this end, strategists in Democratic and Republican administrations alike advocated for using a mixture of threats and inducements to dissuade potential competitors from taking steps that would enable them to contest US dominance.

Of course, the precise mix of coercion and inducements varied over time and by policymakers' predilection.¹⁷ The strategy was never as well integrated as its advocates claimed: not only were major centers of geopolitical power—particularly Russia and China—largely outside the US sphere of influence, but US policy often drifted into foreign adventures that bore only a loose relationship to unipolar maintenance.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the hope was still that US diplomatic, economic, and military instruments would suffice to influence others' policies and preserve US post-Cold War preeminence by preventing peer and near-peer competitors from coming together.

The primacist impulse colored the US response toward China throughout the 1990s. Many analysts claim that US policy emphasized “engagement” with China for most of the post-Cold War period.¹⁹ This claim is true, but only to a point: in keeping with primacy, US policy also included harder-edged elements. Indeed, Democratic and Republican administrations from the 1990s sought to integrate China into what some term the liberal international order while simultaneously creating military options to punish Chinese aggrandizement beyond a level the United States deemed acceptable.²⁰

By this logic, integration would provide economic and political incentives for China to accept US hegemony—and perhaps liberalize China's domestic order—even as US military efforts underlined the costs China would run if it challenged US predominance. Accordingly, US policymakers promoted China's emergence as a “responsible stakeholder” in international forums²¹ even as the United States also built up militarily in East Asia, nurtured a nascent counterbalancing coalition, and signaled that Chinese efforts to challenge the United States would be strongly resisted.²² Engagement, in other words, was only half the battle—primacy sought to make China's rise (beyond a certain hazy point) either infeasible or unattractive.

The Failure of Primacy

Even on its own terms, however, primacy failed by the mid-to-late 2000s. Analysts will long debate why this situation came about. In practice, it seems overly optimistic for American policymakers to have hoped to control the course and scope of China's growth, given the limited tools (short of war) available.²³ Regardless, if primacy was designed to sustain US preeminence, then the growing contemporary chorus claiming that the United States faces a new era of “great power competition”—as the 2017 *National Security Strategy* puts it—due largely to China's rise highlights the strategy's shortcomings.²⁴

To be sure, analysts are divided over whether China's rise has already relegated US unipolarity itself to history's trash heap. Some, such as Robert Blackwill and Ashley Tellis, contend that unipolarity endures but faces real pressure from a

surging China—as they explain, “the American effort to ‘integrate’ China into the liberal international order has now generated new threats” to US preeminence and could “eventually result in a consequential challenge to American power globally.”²⁵ Conversely, others accept that the United States is no longer the world’s sole superpower, with many even claiming that Washington

Analysts are divided over whether China’s rise has already relegated US unipolarity to history’s trash heap

faces a “new Cold War” against a full-fledged Chinese economic, military, and ideological competitor.²⁶ These differences are important, but they should not mask the larger point: on the central issue of whether primacy kept near-peer competitors and viable challengers at bay, analysts and strategists across the policy spectrum implicitly acknowledge its shortcomings as China’s rise has meaningfully reduced the United States’ geopolitical lead. Far from preserving American dominance, primacy has instead left the United States facing what former Undersecretary of

Defense Michele Flournoy terms “uncertainty about the US ability to check various Chinese moves.”²⁷ Baldly stated, American policymakers are grappling with a much-diminished margin for error in international affairs.

Contesting China’s Rise

Responding to this sea-change in the distribution of power, a growing consensus has now fixed on the idea that the United States should “compete” with Beijing and use harder-nosed policies to now contest China’s rise. Different analysts promote various objectives as the focus of this competition, but they generally include some combination of (1) protecting the US-led international order from problematic Chinese behaviors; (2) preventing China from obtaining regional hegemony or a sphere of influence in Asia; (3) defending US allies; and (4) promoting “free and open” regional arrangements in the Indo-Pacific.²⁸

Nor is this just talk: Washington’s military plans, diplomatic efforts, and economic initiatives are increasingly geared toward a lengthy contest with the People’s Republic. Building on efforts that go back to the Clinton administration, a growing share of US naval and air forces are deploying to the Indo-Pacific theater.²⁹ Similarly, policymakers are moving to reduce US economic integration with China, especially in critical industries, and exploring new alliance and diplomatic arrangements oriented against Beijing.³⁰

The move toward competition, however, raises more questions than it resolves. As noted earlier, competition is not, in itself, a grand strategy. The

approach can tell us that conciliatory options are off the table and suggest that certain approaches (e.g., military contestation and reducing economic dependence) are preferable. Yet, it leaves it opaque how these tools obtain the ends sought and the terms under which they do so. These are no small issues. Depending on what policymakers define as success in defending allies, promoting an acceptable order, and blocking Chinese regional hegemony or a sphere of influence, competition may mean trying to conquer (if not destroy) China, engaging in a tit-for-tat maneuver for position, seeking to sway hearts and minds throughout the world, or something else entirely. The risks and costs facing the United States along the way would vary accordingly.

Neo-Primacy and US-Chinese Competition

In fact, embedded in discussions of US-Chinese competition is a new US grand strategy—neo-primacy. As developed over the last decade, neo-primacy breaks from classic primacy in accepting that unipolarity is at best under significant duress from a near-peer China and at worst may be entirely over; diverging from post-Cold War assumptions, US international preeminence and the freedom of action it allowed are no longer taken as givens. Still, drawing upon the idea that US dominance in international affairs is valuable to US national security, the strategy advocates significant investments in US military and economic capabilities to undo the impact of China's rise and reconstitute US strength.

Of course, different analysts recommend distinct—and not mutually exclusive—investment priorities in pursuit of neo-primacy. Some advocate greater focus on the United States itself to facilitate long-term economic and technological growth.³¹ Others emphasize greater military spending in the short term to shore up the military distribution of power vis-à-vis the PRC today; this is often accompanied by calls for greater funding for next-generation military technologies that may help keep a qualitative edge over Beijing.³² Although not about US capabilities per se, many analysts further recommend investing in the appeal of the US geopolitical brand to help acquire allies that can contest China's ascendance.³³ Meanwhile, calls to bolster US advantages are often joined with parallel recommendations to slow China's own economic, military, and/or political rise by, for instance, blocking Chinese access to advanced technologies and penalizing predatory Chinese economic practices.³⁴

Differences aside, uniting these proposals is an emphasis on shifting the distribution of power toward approximating that which existed before China's rise cut into the US lead. Irrespective of China's emergence as a near-peer competitor—

and classic primacy's own failure to arrest this development—the net result would theoretically enable the United States to operate vis-à-vis China with significantly reduced constraints. The unstated expectation seems to be that China will be either cowed, such that it accommodates itself to continued US leadership in global affairs, or deterred from challenging US interests.³⁵ In effect, what

Neo-primacy is about regaining dominance by outpacing other powers

would emerge is a China that is less able and/or willing to contest US dominance and abandons its more assertive approach to world affairs that some believe emerged in the late 2000s.³⁶ Put bluntly, if classic primacy was about dissuading peer or near-peer competitors from rising in a period of untrammled US dominance, then neo-primacy is about somehow regaining that dominance by outpacing other powers.

This approach has been quickly embraced by a wide array of policymakers, strategists, and analysts both within and outside of the US government. For all the accusations of its policy disarray, for example, the Trump administration's embrace of neo-primacy has been consistent and clear. Extending the 2017 *National Security Strategy's* declaration of a "new era of great power competition," the 2018 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) contends that the United States will not be content simply to keep competitors in check but will rather "ensure the balances of power remain in our favor."³⁷ Continuing this theme, Vice President Michael Pence used a major speech on US-Chinese relations in late 2018 to criticize China for "contesting [America's] geopolitical advantages" and to call for "renewed American strength" to extend the US lead.³⁸ Similarly, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo acknowledged that US policy is geared toward "ensuring that China retains only its proper place in the world."³⁹ Put simply, great power competition under the Trump administration has translated not into an effort just to sustain international order or block Chinese regional hegemony, but to do so particularly by reclaiming much of the dominance enjoyed by the United States before China's emergence as a great power.

Yet the Trump administration is hardly alone in its support for neo-primacy, as an array of analysts in think tanks and academia across the political spectrum advocate parallel policies aimed at growing the US position, diminishing China's, or both. Hal Brands and Zack Cooper, for instance, argue that the United States should "reduce China's geopolitical, economic, and ideological influence; weaken its power potential; and exacerbate the strains under which Beijing operates."⁴⁰ The Brookings Institution's Thomas Wright offers parallel advice. As he puts it, the United States faces competition with China (and

Russia) “for the future of the international order” in which “it is not possible to fashion win-win outcomes.” By this logic, defending US interests means triumphing over China, requiring that the United States “maintain its military advantage” and bolster US alliances.⁴¹ Meanwhile, analysts Melanie Hart and Kelly Magsamen urge that the United States “maintain its economic primacy” and advocate a military buildup to overcome the problem that “the U.S. edge against China [...] is decreasing;” otherwise, the United States risks ceding “substantial ground” to China.⁴²

Nor is this evidence just a selective culling of certain studies, as Congressional reports and testimony further indicate neo-primacy’s ascendance. The Congressionally mandated review of the 2018 NDS, for example, declares that “changes at home and abroad are diminishing U.S. military advantages” such that “U.S. military superiority is no longer assured.” Accordingly, the report seeks sustained investment aimed at regaining American military leads over the PRC (among others).⁴³ Testifying before the House of Representatives in 2018, former Obama administration official Ely Ratner similarly called for “arrest[ing] China’s momentum” by reinforcing “the foundations of American power” and, in particular, “prioritiz[ing] defense resources for the China challenge.” Ratner’s advice hews closely to Aaron Friedberg’s—a veteran of the George W. Bush administration—who likewise encourages preserving “the widest possible gap between China’s ‘comprehensive national power’ and that of the United States.”⁴⁴ Other Congressional testimony, meanwhile, saw analysts decry the possibility of China becoming “the dominant global leader and [the United States...] second to them”⁴⁵ and promote “sustained, significant investments in relevant military capabilities” and other tools of statecraft to “sustain [US] advantages and address emerging challenges vis-à-vis China.”⁴⁶

In short, calls to compete with China have led much of the US strategic community to embrace a strategy more focused on regaining the United States’ dominant post-Cold War economic-military position than on sustaining the extant international order, protecting US alliances, or blocking a Chinese bid for regional hegemony. Indeed, neo-primacy’s advocates suggest the matter when discussing the particular threat posed by China: as the Center for a New American Security explained in a Congressionally mandated review of US defense strategy, the United States “is at risk of losing strategic advantage to China” even though “eroding U.S. advantages in the Indo-Pacific are within America’s power to arrest and reverse.”⁴⁷ The problem, in other words, is that the foundations of US strength—something separate from US interests—are under duress, requiring competition to reverse the trends. By this logic, only relative American advantages will produce security, and losing the lead will compromise US interests.

Pitfalls of Neo-Primacy

Neo-primacy might intuitively seem a shrewd approach to a fractious period in world politics. All things being equal, it often pays to be as strong as possible in international politics: the stronger a state is, the more credible its defensive and deterrence efforts, the more reliable its pledges to allies, the greater its capacity for extracting economic concessions from partners (and potentially coercing concessions from adversaries), and the larger the margin for strategic missteps.⁴⁸ And in the particular context of the US-Chinese contest, one might infer that the United States has the wherewithal to at least attempt to reclaim the sort of dominance that existed in the 1990s. For example, US defense spending as a share of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is near postwar lows, implying that the United States can readily allocate more to military purposes.⁴⁹ Similarly, the United States' traditional economic dynamism and the advantages afforded by the dollar's role as the world's reserve currency may suggest pathways for buttressing US economic strength and undercutting China's. Meanwhile, many—though certainly not all—governments in East Asia seemingly welcome a stronger American counter to an ascendant China, suggesting that a quest to reclaim US dominance may be diplomatically sustainable.⁵⁰

Despite this superficial plausibility, however, neo-primacy suffers from real limitations. Combined, these pitfalls raise questions over the strategy's ability to advance US national security, let alone regain an uncontested lead over China at acceptable cost and risk.

The China Threat May Be Over-Hyped

First, and at the most basic level, it is not obvious that the China threat is as draconian as neo-primacy allows. To be sure, China is a more capable competitor than the United States has faced in many decades (and perhaps ever). Even compared to the Soviet Union, China enjoys a more dynamic economy, is better integrated into international institutions, has a larger and more homogenous population, and is geographically closer to the arena of major strategic contestation.⁵¹

That said, China is in a less advantageous position to do much with the capabilities at its disposal. On one level, Beijing does not enjoy the power vacuums along its periphery enjoyed by the Soviet Union during the heyday of the USSR's post-war growth. It remains hemmed in by geography while potential balancers such as Japan, India, and Australia all retain significant latent capabilities that could be devoted to defense; many such counter-balancers have given strong signals of their inclination to oppose Chinese aggrandizement.⁵² These points also interact, giving a defensive advantage to many of the states along China's periphery and underlining that a Chinese quest for regional hegemony or

sphere of influence can be opposed by states positioned to help frustrate Chinese ambitions.

In essence, China is a threat, but it may not be the near-hegemon poised to ride roughshod over East Asia, cowing all local actors or carving off a sphere of influence, that neo-primacy assumes. By making more of the China threat than warranted, neo-primacy thereby risks creating a broader and deeper contest with Beijing than is warranted.

It Is Difficult to Stop China's Continued Rise

Second, neo-primacy's logic rests on shaky foundations, as the United States' opportunity to reclaim preeminence is extremely small, and the effort will likely prove both counterproductive and dangerous. Baldly, if the United States was unable to keep China from becoming a near-peer competitor in the first place via classic primacy, it is even less likely that the United States has the wherewithal to put the Chinese genie back in the bottle and now push China from the great power ranks via neo-primacy.

States generally balance when confronted with a direct external threat. This tendency is significant in the US-China context because, under neo-primacy, the United States would effectively declare itself a direct threat to China at a time when US analysts acknowledge China has a growing capacity to oppose American plans and ambitions.⁵³ Though China is not poised to dominate East Asia, it can thus be expected to devote its own considerable resources toward keeping pace with US efforts to arrest China's rise and/or shift the relative distribution of power in the US favor. The odds of major crises would then increase as Washington and Beijing maneuver for position, in turn raising the odds of escalatory spirals, miscalculation, and war.⁵⁴

Trends in military spending and recent economic developments suggest China's capacity to oppose neo-primacy and a US drive to reclaim untrammelled preeminence. On one level, China currently devotes a smaller share of its economic wealth to military purposes than the United States, yet it has still managed to reduce American military advantages. This implies that Beijing could do quite a bit to frustrate American policy simply by allocating more to international purposes; if the United States feels pressured by a China that spends 2 percent of its GDP on defense, a China that spends 3 or 4 percent of GDP on defense—roughly what the United States has spent since the Cold War—would present a still larger problem and place the United States in an even worse position.⁵⁵

The effort to reclaim primacy will likely prove both counterproductive and dangerous

Nor is it just military spending that underlines neo-primacy's limitations. After all, ongoing efforts to decouple the US and Chinese economies—designed partly to limit Chinese growth—has pushed Beijing toward fostering a self-sustaining domestic economy able to withstand “sustained acrimony with the United States.” Given this, it is reasonable to infer that additional economic efforts to outpace Beijing will generate countervailing Chinese responses.⁵⁶ Considering, too, that China's economy has grown at a faster rate than the United States' (even during COVID-19) and that the country has worked to narrow the US-China technological gap,⁵⁷ the PRC's ability to keep pace with the United States cannot be discounted.⁵⁸ Shifts in the distribution of power since the Cold War make neo-primacy self-defeating by enabling China to match US efforts while risking US national security along the way. In this sense, neo-primacy risks exacerbating the very problem it seeks to address.

The US Faces Domestic Constraints

Third, neo-primacy is of questionable domestic sustainability—indeed, it has the potential to undermine the United States' own strength. Independent of competition with China, the United States likely needs substantial investments in healthcare, education, and infrastructure (among others) over the coming decades. Although some of these could be funded as part of a neo-primacist competition with China, other social programs (e.g., Social Security and public pensions) are likely to require additional funding, particularly as US demographics change.⁵⁹ This situation is further exacerbated as bills come due for the United States' prior spending; as the Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported even before the COVID-19 pandemic reduced revenue and increased borrowing, by 2028 “the [Federal] government will spend more on net interest than it will spend on either defense or nondefense discretionary outlays.”⁶⁰ Of course, the United States can service its financial obligations by raising taxes, accepting additional debt, or both.⁶¹ Unless the US economy grows faster than US obligations, however, the United States will face a difficult choice in the years ahead.

On the one hand, policymakers can constrain the funding available for foreign activities in order to devote the marginal resource to domestic needs. In this situation, neo-primacy could prove unsustainable, as the resources needed to compete with China for international dominance at a time of declining US relative power prove lacking due to internal demands. The United States would then risk taking on foreign obligations and exacerbating tensions with China without the wherewithal to service these missions.

On the other hand, policymakers might opt to suppress domestic consumption to fund the contest with China. Here, however, the United States could end up

harming its long-term competitiveness by foregoing the sort of socio-economic spending that would ensure US economic and military dynamism. In effect, current military consumption would crowd out future domestic investment. Neo-primacy then risks being left unworkable by dragging down the underlying foundations of US strength over time.

To be sure, the United States' ability to borrow at favorable rates while attracting foreign investment can moderate the intensity with which these guns-versus-butter choices have to be made. Still, they do not eliminate the problem. All spending choices entail opportunity costs, and there are grounds to believe neo-primacy's costs leave the approach unworkable.

Neo-Primacy Discourages Allied Support

A fourth problem concerns the United States' current and potential allies. Among existing partners, neo-primacy encourages cheap-riding on American security largesse. Of course, classic primacy likely did the same. Unlike its fore-runner, however, neo-primacy discourages allied support at a time when, if US relative power truly is declining as neo-primacy argues, US policy ought to be designed to solicit maximal allied contributions on the United States' behalf. Instead, the strategy enables allies like Japan and Australia to gain security against China while contributing comparatively little to the process, secure in the knowledge that the United States is committed to blocking China's ascent even as its relative position wanes.⁶² Among prospective partners, meanwhile, states such as Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand have distanced themselves from US policy, in part driven by what they seem to worry is a self-defeating, costly, and narrowly self-interested American effort at preventing China's rise.⁶³

Neo-primacy discourages allied support at the precise time it ought to solicit maximal contributions

Combined, these trends leave the United States in a difficult position. Having acknowledged that sustaining US preeminence is costlier than in the past, the United States is now compelled to work harder still, even while depriving itself of as much backing as could otherwise be expected from regional actors—many of which are rich countries that should have more skin in the game of checking China than the United States and control valuable pieces of waterfront property. Illustrating the problem, Japan has been gripped by a long-standing debate over whether to spend more than 1 percent of its GDP on defense; Australia has seen similar debates over exceeding 2 percent. In light of China's proximity and the magnitude of the problem, such reluctance

to do more for national defense—of which defense spending is a key component—is difficult to explain absent some calculation in Tokyo and Canberra that there are other routes to their security.⁶⁴

Neo-Primacy Is Revisionist

Finally, neo-primacy threatens to transform the United States into a revisionist actor, thereby threatening US strategic objectives.⁶⁵ To be sure, the US focus on defending allies, blocking Chinese regional hegemony, and sustaining the

**Attempting to
reclaim unipolarity
makes US policy
revisionist**

extant “order” has been largely defensive, and it is certainly seen that way in Washington. Nevertheless, attempting to *reclaim* the distribution of power that existed under unipolarity prior to China’s growth paradoxically makes American policy revisionist: it seeks to undo the effect of secular changes in the distribution of power and reverse current geopolitical trends. The greater the distribution of

power has changed from the United States’ post-Cold War heyday—that is, the closer China is to a full-peer competitor and the more unipolarity recedes into the distance—the greater the scope of American revisionism; the more power has already changed hands, the more US efforts promise to change existing geopolitical conditions.

This revisionism, in turn, creates problems for the United States. For one thing, it gives allies additional reasons to hedge against potentially reckless American actions that might trigger a crisis or war and provides non-aligned actors further reasons to limit cooperation with the United States than would otherwise be the case. Elements of both trends are evident. Southeast Asian states, for instance, have tried to avoid taking sides in the nascent US-China contest and rebuffed US calls to join in efforts to counterbalance China; likewise, American allies such as Japan and Australia have occasionally distanced themselves from hardline American initiatives—for example, by refusing to criticize Beijing over its 2020 crackdown in Hong Kong.⁶⁶ The result provides China openings to increase its influence that it might not otherwise enjoy and requires that the United States work even harder to obtain political backing and security assistance for its preferred outcomes.

Furthermore, revisionism can undercut the United States’ broader political appeal and delegitimize many of the outcomes sought by Washington. After all, neo-primacy’s emphasis on upending the current distribution of power means the strategy can imperil others’ diplomatic, economic, and military relationships and expectations, raising questions over the rationale for and

appropriateness of American efforts. Illustrating the potential downsides, even long-standing US partners in Europe have resisted US pressure to line up against China to protect their own economic and political ties with Beijing;⁶⁷ indeed, leading European policymakers including French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel now openly seek a middle path for their states amid US-China tensions and have criticized US efforts—such as threatening to reduce intelligence cooperation—to compel compliance with Washington’s anti-China stance.⁶⁸ Similarly, and although affected by a range of factors besides the US pursuit of neo-primacy, a growing share of global audiences have come to view the United States itself as a principal threat to international security.⁶⁹ By leaving the United States progressively more isolated in world affairs, revisionism makes it more difficult for the United States to contest China’s growth and geopolitical influence.

Toward Effective Competition

To the extent that the United States is wedded to competition with China, it instead needs a grand strategy adapted to geopolitical realities. For better or worse, the emerging embrace of neo-primacy is anything but. Neo-primacy is internally inconsistent—simultaneously acknowledging China’s emergence as a viable competitor and seeking that the US reclaim preeminence while ignoring the domestic and international limits to this effort. It is a strategy that paradoxically claims to seek as little change as possible to the status quo while reasoning that the status quo has changed dramatically, and it simultaneously looks to reclaim US power advantages even though it acknowledges US relative strength has declined. At best, the approach may prove a costly mistake; at worst, neo-primacy might well exhaust the United States, undermine the appeal of US objectives, and court conflict with Beijing.

If not neo-primacy, then what? A structured alternative is beyond the scope of this essay, but some principles present themselves. First, any US strategy for an era of great power competition needs to start from a clear recognition that US security does not require preeminence. Even with China’s rise, the United States is an exceedingly powerful, rich, and secure nation. In the nuclear era, little that happens overseas risks the nation’s survival or, given the size of the US economy and vibrancy of domestic political debate, threatens the well-being of its people.

Second, US interests more narrowly involve hindering the rise of a Chinese regional hegemon and, to a lesser extent, ensuring access to East Asian

US security does not require preeminence

markets.⁷⁰ Though not vital in themselves, these outcomes would reinforce the United States' already significant degree of security. After all, failure to block a Chinese regional hegemon might create conditions for extensive international tensions, while access to Asian markets may contribute to US economic growth in the years ahead.

Third, because the aforementioned US interests are important but not vital, the United States would thus be well served by constraining the costs and risks it runs to pursue them. When it comes to blocking Chinese regional hegemony, the United States should encourage capable local actors such as India, Japan, and Australia to balance China while backstopping their efforts. These regional actors may be unable to offset China on their own, but they can certainly contribute more toward limiting China's opportunities for aggrandizement while helping to protect valuable pieces of real estate.

Substantively, this approach means reducing, without eliminating, the American forward military presence and making clear the limits on US commitments—the United States would fill in regional capability gaps and act as an honest diplomatic broker when regional spats arise. Access to markets, meanwhile, follows. Having reduced the intensity of competition, Washington would be poised to bargain with Beijing over issues such as unfair trade practices without geopolitical tensions poisoning the already complicated process. Likewise, having positioned itself to hold the regional balance of power, the United States would be able to ensure US firms retain market access in areas defended by US (and allied) power. In fact, as Cold War experience implies, the larger the China threat becomes and the more important US strength is to supplement local actors', the greater the United States' economic leverage.⁷¹

Neo-primacists might allege that this approach does too little to defend American allies, surrenders existing visions of international order, and allows a Chinese ideological threat to market-oriented liberalism to grow. None of these concerns pass muster. Allies and order are tools to obtain security, not ends unto themselves; if the steps neo-primacy recommends to secure these ends harm US well-being—as the above analysis suggests they do—the strategy needs to be reoriented.

As for ideology, it is true that Western liberalism is under duress. Still, it is a bridge too far to blame China for the trend or to suggest that forgoing neo-primacy will somehow translate into a Chinese ideological victory. Not only is there limited evidence that China seeks to export its own domestic model to other countries, but reducing US activism may help eliminate many of the policies and issues that undercut the appeal of the American model around the world today.⁷² Combined, less activism can yield both more security and more influence.

Ultimately, at a time when calls for great power competition are front and center on the foreign policy agenda, strategists need to recognize that competition does not itself dictate a particular course or strategy. Thus far, however, the US approach has focused on re-securing US dominance for its own sake; the core impulse parallels that of Will Ferrell's character, Ricky Bobby, in the movie *Talladega Nights*, who repeatedly argues, "If you're not first, you're last!" This approach is dangerous and potentially self-defeating, made all the more problematic in light of the United States' narrow though real interests in East Asia and the availability of alternative courses of action. As China's emergence propels change in US strategy, it is important to recognize these realities. Neo-primacy is ascendant amid the nascent US-China competition, but it is a game not worth the quid.

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