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Competitive Strategy vis-à-vis China and Russia: A View from the "T Suite"

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Competitive Strategy vis-à-vis China and Russia: A View from the "T Suite"

by Christopher A. Ford[1]

In this latest part of the series, Assistant Secretary Ford outlines the approach being taken in the "T" family of bureaus at the Department of State in support of U.S. competitive strategy vis-à-vis the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, as inspired by the U.S. National Security Strategy.

This edition of the *ACIS Papers* outlines how the "T" family of bureaus at the Department of State[2] manages functional and technical programs in order to provide the most robust and effective support possible to U.S. foreign and national security policy. In particular, this paper will focus upon T-family support to U.S. competitive strategy vis-à-vis the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia, as outlined in the landmark U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) that was published in December 2017.

I. The National Security Strategy

The NSS stresses, in particular, the critical national security challenge the United States faces in dealing with what some call its "near-peer" competitors, the PRC and Russia, and provides some key concepts and principles that have helped guide our approach to supporting U.S. strategy. The NSS' focus on inter-state competition signals the United States' steadfast commitment to push back against PRC or Russian attempts to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests.

In the T family, we discern four key principles from the National Security Strategy to guide our contributions to U.S. competitive strategy in these respects:

1. The PRC and Russia present distinct strategic challenges to the prevailing rules-based international order, and we must find robust and creative answers to the myriad competitive challenges their behavior presents;

2. The PRC and Russia present the United States with "whole-of-government" or even "whole-of-system" challenges, and our responses must be analogously broad wherever possible, and must include vigorous public diplomacy and messaging, promoting our values and approaches in order to help us meet the political and economic aspects of this challenge;

3. Across multiple domains, we must limit the revisionist threats our competitors pose to international security and stability. This includes impeding our competitors' efforts to steal or force transfers of advanced technologies that facilitate the modern military power

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[2] The so-called "T" family consists of the Bureaus of International Security and Nonproliferation (ISN), Political-Military Affairs (PM), and Arms Control, Verification, and Compliance (AVC) – as well as, for functional purposes, the Office of the Coordinator for Cyberspace Issues (S/CCI), which is slated to become the key element of the new Bureau of Cyberspace Security and Emerging Technologies (CSET) that Secretary Pompeo is working to create as part of the T family.

that they seek in their drive to dismantle the existing liberal international order; and

4. We must vigorously build and lead coalitions of allies and partners and ensure they contribute effectively to successfully meeting these challenges. We must also encourage burden sharing and help expand our allies' access to the capabilities and partnerships that they will need to stand with us in challenging the PRC and Russia's global ambitions.

Yet despite our determination to compete effectively, we must simultaneously remain open to diplomatic engagement. The United States will thus continue to seek cooperation on shared interests with Beijing and Moscow where possible — including on arms control and peacekeeping measures that meet our security interests and those of international peace and security.

II. The Competitive Challenge

These critical elements of guidance inform the approaches the T family of bureaus take, and that we are working to refine on an ongoing basis.

Over the past 20 years, both Beijing and Moscow have made considerable strides in building up their geopolitical strength vis-à-vis the United States, empowering them to act with increasing aggressiveness against U.S. interests and the postwar international system. Although the United States did not always recognize this challenge, we are now aware and responding.

In the early post-Cold War years, Russia did not initially seem – or act – like a direct threat to the United States or to the democracies of the West. Nevertheless, Moscow made its revisionist intentions visible in 2008 when Russian forces overtly crossed an international border to seize parts of the country of Georgia – a presaging of its aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and 2015.

Similarly, the PRC tried to keep its own ambitions concealed following Deng Xiaoping's famous "24-character strategy" that China should "hide its capabilities and bide its time" by building its strength quietly while awaiting future opportunity – a maxim that hewed so closely to the advice of the late-19th century Japanese diplomat Hayashi Gonsuke in the wake of Japan's wars against China[3] that one wonders whether Beijing had looked to Japanese imperialism of that period for lessons.

Under Hu Jintao and then Xi Jinping, however, the PRC seems to have abandoned Deng's "hide and bide" approach in favor of increasingly barefaced geopolitical revisionism. Led by Xi, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) now quite openly seeks to seize a dominant position in Asia, at the very least, and to acquire military capabilities stronger than those of any other state by 2049 — the centenary of the CCP's founding of the PRC.

Although these Chinese and Russian governments' trajectories have long been examined, and have been becoming increasingly obvious, it took the insight and the historical contribution of President Trump's National Security Strategy to call U.S. foreign and national security policy back to a focus on great-power competition.

A. People's Republic of China

The PRC seeks to have a military more capable than any other in the world by 2049, hegemony in the Asia Pacific region (and one that implicitly erodes U.S. presence), leading positions within international organizations, and a dominant position in the advanced technologies essential to military power. With these achievements, the PRC hopes to claim what it sees as its natural hegemonic place at the center of a world system that generally defers to Beijing's interests.

To these ends, the PRC seeks to expand its so-called "comprehensive national power" (CNP) through a mix of political, economic, military, and "soft power" initiatives. It approaches this effort on a whole-of-system basis capable of, and dedicated to, mobilizing every aspect of Chinese society via the coercive power of the CCP police state.

The PRC's effort to expand its CNP includes a significant expansion of the capabilities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), including its nuclear forces, with an emphasis upon high-technology tools that can help disrupt or completely deny U.S. access to key areas of the Indo-Pacific in a crisis. In this respect, however, Beijing still

[3] Baron Hayashi had advised his countrymen to be patient and not too quickly reveal Japan's imperialist objectives: "At present Japan must keep calm and sit tight, so as to lull suspicions nurtured against her; during this time the foundations of national power must be consolidated; and we must watch and wait for the opportunity in the Orient that will surely come one day. … When this day arrives, Japan will decide her own fate." Quoted in Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York, Random House: 1987), at 208.

remains dependent upon Western technology inputs to fill gaps as it seeks to indigenize domestic capabilities and reduce this dependence.

Access to advanced Western technology is thus a critical part of PRC strategy. Through its "Military-Civil Fusion" (MCF) strategy, state-subsidized and -coordinated commercial and industrial outreach, and traditional and nontraditional espionage, the PRC aggressively targets key Western technology sectors for both licit and illicit acquisition, and then systematically diverts technology from civilian entities to the PLA and the PRC security services. These efforts to buy and steal Western technology are essential to the PRC's ability to take geopolitical advantage of what it sees as a coming "Revolution in Military Affairs" (RMA) based upon such technologies.

The PRC uses aggressive political and economic engagement – including state-subsidized efforts to acquire a dominant market share in advanced-technology sectors such as telecommunications and civil-nuclear power – to build relationships with a growing array of foreign governmental and non-governmental partners around the world. The PRC exploits these relationships for political ends, including through the manipulation of trade and economic ties. The CCP is able and willing to use its tools of domestic political compulsion and overseas influence to coerce cooperation in pursuit of regime political and propaganda objectives, as well as to elicit or compel support for or facilitation of espionage, from private-sector Chinese and Chinese-influenced entities and persons.

The CCP hides its all-consuming desire to remain in power behind propaganda narratives that claim to the Chinese people that: (i) Party leadership is essential to China achieving "national rejuvenation" and reclaiming its proper status in the world after what PRC leaders claim was a "century of humiliation" that it believes was inflicted upon it by Western powers, Russia, and Japan beginning in the mid-19th century; (ii) without the steady hand represented by centralized CCP leadership and control, China itself would fall into chaos; (iii) malign foreign powers with "ulterior motives" of harming the Chinese people lie behind all unrest and dissatisfaction with CCP power in China; and (iv) any criticism of the CCP' policies only helps foreign efforts that threaten China's destiny.

In support of its global ambitions, moreover, the CCP seeks to persuade foreign audiences to believe, specifically, that: (i) the PRC's rise is not to be feared, and that its rapidly expanding military power is merely for defensive purposes; (ii) the PRC's model of technology-facilitated authoritarian state capitalism is better and more successful than Western approaches; (iii) Western political and economic systems are corrupt, decadent, erratic, and dysfunctional; (iv) any criticism of the PRC's policies or geopolitical ambitions, and any efforts to mobilize against its moves to achieve these objectives, represent retrograde "Cold War thinking"; and (v) other countries should put aside any concerns about what Beijing will do with its geopolitical power and join cooperative relationships led by the PRC for mutual benefit and increased global harmony.

B. The Russian Federation

For its part, Russia feels that it suffered humiliating weakness in both the Soviet Union's fall and the early post-Cold War period, and it now seeks to seize status and influence in the world akin to what it imagines itself to have enjoyed in late tsarist days or in the heyday of the Soviet Union. Russia desires a multipolar world managed by a concert of major powers that can counterbalance what it perceives as unilateral U.S. power.

To this end, Russia seeks to restore its sphere of influence, both in the countries of its so-called "near-abroad" (*e.g.*, Ukraine and Georgia) and by acquiring client states farther afield (*e.g.*, Syria) through the use of blatant military aggression, proxy forces, political and military subversion, and the manipulation of political, economic, energy, and military relationships. It is also essential to Russia's strategy to weaken U.S. alliance relationships with Europe and elsewhere, as well as undermining and discrediting U.S. global leadership.

Russia's tactics in pursuit of these objectives tend to be destructive rather than constructive: it seeks to force the United States to engage with Moscow to manage Russian misconduct, rather than entice it to engage cooperatively with Russia by providing positive value in return. The Kremlin is also notably risk-tolerant in its policy choices, not shying away from reckless gambles and extravagant provocations (*e.g.*, its invasions of Georgia and Ukraine, overseas expeditionary warfare in Syria, the deployment of "private" military contractors to hotspots around the world, interference in Western elections, and assassinations or assassination attempts against defectors in the West using radioactive poisons and illegal chemical weapons). Except insofar as Russia seeks to construct a sphere of influence for itself in which other powers must defer to the Kremlin's wishes, Moscow's geopolitical objectives are in these

respects fundamentally negative: the purpose is to undermine global order and to capitalize upon the ensuing disorder to allow Russia to acquire what it desires.

Russia is working to expand the capabilities of its armed forces, including its nuclear forces, in order to give it more tools with which to accomplish these objectives – and also to support its subjective sense of itself in the world as a great power notwithstanding its relative economic backwardness, corruption, and demographic problems. This qualitative build-up emphasizes technologically advanced capabilities, but Russia still remains dependent upon certain Western technological inputs. It recognizes this dependency, but is having trouble producing its own cutting-edge technology in key areas.

In support of its objectives, Russia seeks to build strategic relationships with foreign partners through arms sales, energy-supply relationships, and the provision of civil nuclear technology and reactor services. These relationships provide Moscow with revenue (*e.g.*, since arms sales help defray development and procurement costs for the Russian military) and help create relationships that Moscow leverages for political purposes. High-technology military exports are a highly important source of money and influence for the Kremlin.

In its domestic messaging, the Russian regime encourages Russians to believe that: (i) Russia is beset by enemies, led by the United States, which continually try to subvert Russia's conservative values and undermine its power and dignity; (ii) a strong, centralized, authoritarian national state – buttressed by, and dedicated to, protecting traditional Russian values and the Russian Orthodox Church – is essential to Russia's success against these malign foreign forces; (iii) only such a state can lead the Russian people in their destiny of heroically resisting these depredations and ensuring proper recognition for Russia as a great power; and (iv) Russians who object to the policies or power of this centralized authoritarian state are degenerate subversives who threaten Russia's future and who play into the hands of (or simply work for) malign foreign powers. Not unlike the PRC, moreover, the Russian Federation maintains tight state controls over domestic media, and taking positions disfavored by the regime can be dangerous. (Dangers to journalists in Russia are well-documented, and both countries rank near the bottom of the annual "Press Freedom Index" ratings.)

In its external messaging, Russia seeks less to drive agreement with any particular narrative about itself or the world than simply to sow dissension and confusion in other countries. Indeed, Russian propaganda to some extent even seeks to question the very idea of objective truth itself in ways that undermine others' socio-political cohesion, particularly in Western democracies, and that weaken the geopolitical strength and position of the United States and its allies and partners. Russia undertakes such propaganda and messaging through both overt and covert means, including cyber-facilitated information warfare.

III. The T-Family Approach

A. Implementing Lines of Effort

In contrast to how the United States has traditionally approached threats from the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, we in the T family find it less useful to think of great-power competition in terms of absolute advantage or of absolute capability "denial." We face today's challenges of competition, in fact, precisely because those competitor powers have already grown into "near-peers" of considerable stature and capability; this degree of growth is already a *fait accompli* and cannot simply be "denied" as one might try to keep a terrorist from acquiring nuclear weapons.

In addressing the challenges of near-peer competition, it is thus more useful to emphasize efforts to *affect relative rates of progress*. Competitive advantage, in this context, is measured not by any given capability *per se* – or by its absence – but rather by the degree to which each power's aggregated capabilities (which one can imagine as a summation of its various strengths and weaknesses) confer geopolitical advantage vis-à-vis the other powers' *own* aggregated capabilities.

Because competitive power is a relative rather than an absolute value, effective U.S. strategy can approach the competitive race in either or both of two complementary ways, the elements of which are foreshadowed in the strategic guidance offered by the National Security Strategy. Specifically, we must work to help the United States and its allies "run faster" in that competition, as it were, and we must also help make those who seek to *compete* with us "run more slowly."

For so long as there *is* a competition with these countries threatening our security interests and those of our allies and partners, these two prongs represent our T family lines of effort.

1. In the "run faster" prong, the United States must: create national prosperity and help expand our economy; maintain or increase the attractiveness of our values and ideals, government, and society; build mutually supportive and empowering relationships with a wide range of relevant international partners and other stakeholders; innovate and lead across critical arenas of cutting-edge technology that contribute to national power; and leverage technological advances into the national security arena to deter – and if necessary defeat – aggression and promote American security.

2. In the "make competitors run more slowly" (or "impede progress") prong, acting both on our own and with as many supportive allies and partners as possible, we must take steps that slow our competitors' rates of advance in relevant areas, such as the aforementioned ones, yet without precluding our ability to collaborate with these competitors on shared interests and take advantage of mutually beneficial engagement where possible to manage competition and reduce risk.

B. Missions

The T bureaus are well postured, and are working to improve their capabilities, to contribute to both of these prongs. We help the United States and its allies "run faster," for example, through:

- Advocating for sales, when in our foreign and national security policy interests, of U.S.-manufactured or U.S.-designed items that help sustain crucial U.S. technology and industrial sectors, as well as what the NSS described as our "National Security Innovation Base" – such as in our Defense Industrial Base, the aerospace industry, or the civil nuclear power sector;

- Providing unmatched value to partners that purchase U.S. defense articles, by exporting high quality, cutting-edge defense technology. When partners opt to purchase U.S. defense technology via Foreign Military Sales (FMS), we provide a comprehensive defense *capability*, including the training required to use, maintain, and integrate purchased items and equipment into their doctrine and operations, and including the parts and components required for long-term maintenance support;

- Promoting burden sharing, including undertaking capacity-building programming to help allies and partners become net exporters of stability, to strengthen their ability and willingness to integrate with us operationally, and to resist and push back against malign PRC and Russian influence, pressure, provocations, and intimidation;

- Working together with allies and partners to strengthen our combined capability and willingness to deter aggression and, should deterrence fail, to strengthen our collective ability to prevail against aggressors; and

- Working bilaterally and through leadership in multilateral *fora* and other international institutions to protect U.S. interests and to shape evolving rules and norms in ways that are conducive to continued American prosperity, security, and values vis-à-vis our competitors.

When it comes to helping make our competitors "run more slowly," the T-family bureaus work through:

- Executing arms sales to improve and support our partners' capabilities to directly counter PRC and Russian malign influence and aggression;

- Engaging in capacity building, interoperability training, and burden-sharing to partners in efforts to help them resist intimidation and aggression with us;

- Impeding dangerous technology transfers by properly implementing and supporting national security export controls, foreign investment reviews, visa screening, and other approaches to help impede those competitors' efforts to acquire foreign technology and divert it into military and security applications;

- Engaging diplomatically to raise awareness among relevant stakeholders around the world about the role that technology transfers play in PRC and Russian strategy, to share "best practices" with like-minded partners in preventing dangerous transfers without stifling salutary commercial intercourse, and to increase coordination among such partners as we build "coalitions of caution" to make the development of adversary threat capabilities as difficult, slow, expensive, and unreliable as possible;

- Ensuring that transfers of U.S. defense equipment or technology do not undermine the security of *other* U.S. allies or partners, nor their ability to contribute to our

common interests in resisting PRC or Russian influence, pressure, provocations, and intimidation;

- Implementing sanctions against destabilizing, illegal, or otherwise problematic competitor behavior;

- Engaging bilaterally and through leadership in multilateral *fora* and other international institutions to counter our competitors' growing influence and disinformation campaigns, as well as defeat their efforts to distort or hijack such mechanisms and skew evolving rules and norms in ways disadvantageous to the United States;

- Developing effective and verifiable arms control frameworks and norms of responsible behavior that help to contain potential adversary threats, increase strategic transparency and predictability, reduce the risk of unwanted escalation or accident, and deter provocative and destabilizing actions; and

- Leveraging the PM Bureau's established State and Defence Department planning structures and arrangements, as well as the exchange of foreign policy and military advisors, to better synchronize efforts related to great power competition in both departments.

Any serious strategy implicitly or explicitly *prioritizes*. At least to the extent that one does not bring additional resources and manpower to the table, after all, the act of prioritization is necessarily also to some degree an act of *de*-prioritization – that is, of making choices between actually or potentially competing goals *all of which* have at least some merit. Such choices are neither easy nor pleasant, especially for a policy community that grew accustomed to dealing with national security and foreign policy issues during a post-Cold War "singularity" that seemingly allowed us to do "everything, everywhere, all the time." Nevertheless, especially in an era of revived interstate competition, such tough choices are inescapable.

As the T family has increased its focus on support for U.S. competitive strategy, we have thus de-emphasized other missions – though without abandoning any. Within the ISN Bureau's programming work, for instance, we have made capacity-building efforts more threat-responsive, and more keyed to the foreign and national security policy priorities identified in the NSS.

Specifically, in response to threat assessments from the U.S. Intelligence Community, we have augmented ISN Bureau export control-related capacity-building directed against chemical and biological threats while reducing spending on nuclear-related matters. We have also focused programming more upon closing threat pathways associated with the state competitors identified in the NSS: the PRC, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. Across the T family, we understand the challenges of balancing equities and ensuring rational prioritization in a time of constrained resources, and we are working to ensure that our choices in balancing such equities are as clear and as thoughtful as possible.

C. Resources

In accomplishing our missions and emphasizing our support to U.S. competitive strategy, the T family's most important resource is its people. Our components have an experienced reservoir of human capital to draw upon in order to accomplish their missions. This includes a cadre of civil servants, who provide enormous experience in a range of technical fields, including many staff members with advanced degrees and highly specialized expertise in the sciences, and others with decades of experience with bilateral and multilateral engagement focused upon issues such as weapons of mass destruction, space security, cybersecurity, ballistic and cruise missile technology, dual-use items, and national security export controls.

T family personnel, however, also include Foreign Service Officers employed in the Department of State and as Foreign Policy Advisors (POLADS) with U.S. military commands around the globe, additional staff such as American Association for the Advancement of Science Fellows, a large number of highly experienced contractors, and a number of civil servants and locally employed staff forward-deployed abroad as part of efforts such as the Export Control and Border Security program.

In terms of financial resources, the T family administers funds that we use, *inter alia*, for capacity-building and other programming efforts that contribute to U.S. competitive strategy. The PM Bureau, for instance, manages various programs designed to provide American defense items and technology to partners and Allies.

In Fiscal Year 2019, in fact, PM managed $55 billion in FMS and authorized $115 billion in Direct Commercial Sales of arms and munitions to U.S. allies and partners around the world, as well as nearly $7 billion in Title 22 security

sector assistance funding, including $71 million in peacekeeping capacity building efforts. PM also coordinated the Defense Department's implementation of nearly $9 billion in Title 10 funding for security sector assistance. Much of this directly contributes to the NSS-derived priority of helping U.S. allies and partners be *better* allies and partners, and to contribute more effectively to the shared challenges we face from PRC and Russian revisionism. Through the 2019 Joint Security Sector Assistance Review, State and the Defense Department coordinated at various levels to ensure that our assistance authorities were synchronized to support our national security and foreign policy interests.

The ISN Bureau administers about $250 million in annual programming, which is used for a variety of nonproliferation and international security-related efforts, but which the Bureau has increasingly directed towards programs that build capacity while also contributing to competitive strategy vis-à-vis the PRC and Russia. The Bureau is working to adeptly align funding to current strategic priorities, and has been going through a multi-year reform effort to increase the degree to which programming decisions are made on the basis of threat-prioritized criteria reflecting the United States' top foreign policy and national security objectives. This has resulted in a greater stress upon projects such as support for border security and related efforts to help countries around Russia's contested periphery control their frontiers in this current era of "grey zone" and "hybrid" warfare threats, as well as support for export control and international sanctions enforcement capacity-building to augment partner countries' ability to prevent Chinese entities from engaging with the Iranian or North Korean missile programs.

D. Structure

Large portions of the T family have long been structured in ways conducive to supporting U.S. competitive strategy vis-à-vis Russia and the PRC. The PM Bureau, for instance, has essentially always been organized in large part around providing American defense items and technology to partners and allies – and to facilitating military training and capacity-building work – in order to increase these countries' interoperability with U.S. military forces in time of conflict, enhance their ability to contribute to United Nations peacekeeping missions, and augment their overall military effectiveness.

Similarly, the AVC Bureau is organized around supporting arms control negotiations and managing competition and risk reduction activities with Russia and the PRC. For some years AVC has also played the lead State Department role in efforts to strengthen extended deterrence, and works closely with other bureaus in the Department to use assurance measures to empower U.S. allies to act with us collectively in deterring aggression, from the grey zone to the nuclear arena. AVC also focuses on marshaling cooperative responses to threats that the United States and its allies and partners face from both the PRC and Russia. Such threats include Russian ands PRC efforts to develop dangerous and destabilizing capabilities in various domains, and to advance hypocritical disarmament proposals, policies, and agreements that threaten the current rules-based international order.

Recently, moreover, T family components have worked to increase their focus upon supporting U.S. competitive strategy vis-à-vis the PRC and Russia. The ISN Bureau, for instance, has been realigned to increase the effectiveness of the support it provides in this respect, including through the creation of a new Competitive Strategy Office (ISN/CSO) to serve as a State Department liaison point with elements and efforts elsewhere in the U.S. Government that are focused upon technology-control and counterintelligence issues vis-à-vis great power competitors.

A further new and exciting development is the planned creation of an entirely new Cyberspace Security and Emerging Technologies (CSET) Bureau, to be located in the T family. In June 2019, the Department notified Congress of its plans. This new CSET Bureau is intended to bring under one roof the Department's current diplomacy related to cyberspace security, to expand these capacities, and to add to this critical work a dedicated cadre of professional staff focused upon understanding and ensuring the development of coordinated diplomatic responses to the ongoing national security challenges presented by emerging technologies in areas such as Artificial Intelligence. CSET would represent a critically important new aspect of T-family efforts to support U.S. national security strategy.

IV. Conclusion

At present, we are working to refine and improve our support to U.S. competitive strategy vis-à-vis the PRC and Russia, and to find additional pathways to success as we address our policies to the competitive challenges

presented by those powers. We are also working to support the State Department's larger efforts to step up enterprise-wide coordination of PRC-related policy under the supervision of the Deputy Secretary and the Enterprise Governance Board. To this end, we have initiated a T-wide review of our support to U.S. competitive strategy, of which this document is merely an initial product, and we have assigned a senior executive from ISN to the "T" front office to help coordinate all efforts across the four bureaus.

We are excited by the prospect of finding ways to do more, and to do it better. We hope that in the months ahead we will be able to share more with you about how we are living up to these aspirations.

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