



**Thomas G. Mahnken, ed..** *Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century: Theory, History, and Practice*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2012. 344 pp. \$29.95, e-book, ISBN 978-0-8047-8318-7.

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*Competitive Strategies for the 21st Century*, edited by Thomas G. Mahnken, a former deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Policy Planning and currently the Jerome E. Levy Chair of Economic Geography and National Security at the Naval War College, is the product of a conference of a similar name held at the Naval War College in August 2010. The book is a rallying cry for the U.S. government to do more against the so-called China threat; so perhaps a more accurately descriptive title for both the publication and the meeting would have been “Competitive Strategies: Theory, History and Potential Practice against China,” as China is the “practice” focus throughout. The primary strength of the book is that it serves as a primer about the value, implementation, and, to a lesser extent, limitations of competitive strategies. This book is worth a read for those unfamiliar with such an approach.

Partly due to the time lag between the conference and the 2012 publication of the book, however, many of the points raised regarding China (through no fault of the authors)—specifically that there is a need in Washington to focus more attention in China’s direction—have become less salient. That timing, a reliance on Cold War analogies with only occasionally noted limitations, and the continual and consequently repetitive homage to Andrew Marshall, director of the Pentagon’s Of-

fice of New Assessment since 1973 (to whom the book is dedicated), results in some portions of the book being more useful than the book as a whole. The Cold War analogies tend to breakdown rather rapidly as the structure of the international system is different and the U.S.-China relationship is a far cry from U.S.-Soviet competition.

*Competitive Strategies* is divided into four parts: “The Concept of Competitive Strategies,” “The Practice of Competitive Strategies,” “The United States and China: Toward Strategic Competition?” and “Alternative Strategies for the Competition.” These can be translated into the concept and theory of competitive strategies, competitive strategies in the Cold War, the China threat, and the application of competitive strategies to dealing with the China threat. Mahnken provides a road map of the book in chapter 1. He states that the United States will face three challenges in particular in coming years: Al Qaeda and its affiliates, such nuclear-armed regimes as North Korea, and “most consequential ... the rise of China” (p. 3). Providing the why of and how to deal with these challenges through competitive strategies is the volume’s objective.

The question of “why” use competitive strategies to address the “rising China” issue is addressed in part 1. Simply stated, competitive strategies are those undertaken over a long peri-

od, capitalizing (in this case) on America's strengths to gain advantage over China by exploiting its weaknesses. Chapters by Stephen Posen, Bradford Lee, and Barry Watts provide ample evidence for the value of competitive strategies as a theoretical approach. Posen presents an excellent overview regarding the value and limitation of competitive strategies. Lee offers context for the use of competitive strategies. He states that "the basic idea--important to other chapters in this volume--is to conceive of a course of action that will induce the enemy to blunder into a self-defeating reaction" (p. 30). His chapter is rich with historical examples, which is what the Strategy and Policy Department where Lee teaches has traditionally built its reputation on. Watts's contribution focuses on barriers to acting strategically, or explanations why strategies fail. He considers straightforward reasons, such as management and leadership; more complex considerations, such as the failure to differentiate between strategic puzzles, which ultimately have answers; and mysteries, which may have multiple answers or no answers at all. All three authors tend to overlook how the U.S.-China relationship is different and to ignore the idea that individuals like Bill Gates and Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner are more apt to influence the relationship than such individuals as Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta.

Lee's and Watts's essays are the first of many chapters in the volume in which Marshall's contributions are referenced and lauded. Marshall, who makes an annual pilgrimage to the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, every summer with a study team, is an icon in security studies. His contributions are important and should be noted, but the redundancy of those notations becomes significant later if considering what might have been pared down in order to allow additional substantive text.

What is missing from part 1 is a clear, succinct explanation of "what" competitive strategies are; instead, the authors jump directly into "why"

using competitive strategies is a valuable approach. Perhaps the conference report nature of this book overwhelmed the peer review process. A direct approach and definition are not provided until chapter 6, in Daniel Gouré's "Overview of the Competitive Strategies Initiative." He states: "As implemented in the Department of Defense, CS [competitive strategies] was both a process and a product. As a process, it was a method of systematic strategic thinking that allowed for developing and evaluating U.S. defense strategy in terms of long-term competition. As a product, it was a plan of action (or set of plans) or simply a guide for helping the nation gain and maintain a long-term advantage in a particular competition" (p. 94). This chapter should have been placed earlier in the volume. It offers considerable detail on the link between net assessment and competitive strategies, providing both a history and clear explanation of its components. Consequently, it also presents full information on Marshall's role in the conceptualization and utilization of competitive strategies during the Cold War, negating the need for reiteration elsewhere, including in the previous chapter by Gordon Barrass.

While Barrass also provides insight into the history of competitive strategies during the Cold War and, again, the role of Marshall and the Office of Net Assessment, perhaps his most interesting and unique contribution is his discussion of the role of bureaucratic politics. Specifically he asks how to get the Pentagon and larger security community to "focus its collective energies on competitive strategies" (p. 88). This discussion leads to two admittedly sensitive questions, past and future: who has responsibility for implementation and who controls the acquisition money needed to implement competitive strategies? Without both accountability and authority for execution, those who would not benefit would, and will, thwart or kill efforts to implement competitive strategies. Further, given the prominent nature of trade and financing that characterizes the U.S.-China relationship, injecting an economic or

business perspective is essential. It has become fashionable of late to tally Chinese cyber espionage as a trillion dollar loss, but this does not square with continued business operations of companies like Apple. Perhaps learning from Apple rather than the Cold War would be more useful to inform national security thinking.

John Battilega concludes part 2 with his chapter “Soviet Military Thought and the U.S. Competitive Strategies Initiative.” It is initially a strong, though by this time somewhat redundant, chapter in its presentation of history and purpose of competitive strategies, especially in long-term military competitions. But it becomes an extended piece on Soviet thought and structure. Battilega ends his essay with a useful section “Observations for the Future,” which includes a discussion about the importance of understanding the targeted country of competitive strategies. Battilega is not the first to have done so; in fact, it is a significant thread that runs throughout the analyses in the collection. It is especially important at this juncture though, as part 3, which follows, specifically focuses on China—a country of such size and diversity that one can find evidence of whatever hypothesis one seeks to prove.

The conclusions of chapters 8 through 14 can be summarized as “Washington is not paying sufficient attention to the threat of a rising China.” As already stated, the book and conference appear to have been intended as somewhat of a rallying cry for Washington to get on board with a more assertive policy to counter Chinese nefarious intentions. The need for such a rallying cry, however, has principally been overcome by the “pivot to Asia” policy, Defense Strategic Guidance that specifically underscores the importance of the Asia-Pacific region, and the Air Sea Battle (ASB) concept, all advanced since the 2010 conference. But rallying cries often stress passion over subtlety and nuance, and so too do the several chapters in the book regarding China.

Individual essays provide interesting and useful analyses of Chinese capabilities and potentially useful competitive strategies that have not been negated by updated Washington policies since 2010. James Holmes presents a thoughtful examination of competitive naval capabilities and potential reactions of regional third parties to U.S.-China competition. Toshi Yoshihara extends that line of analysis, examining how Japan might use competitive strategies to complicate Beijing’s plans and diminish its strengths. Similarly, Australian analyst Ross Babbage offers a view from the Western Pacific. He begins by challenging six assumptions on which “security planning has been based since World War II” and “are now being seriously challenged” (p. 236).

Chapters in part 4 focus on considerations of how the United States might use competitive strategies to counter the China threat demonstrated in the previous chapters. However, many of the suggestions made are now at least partially evidenced in concepts (Air Sea Battle) and policies (pivot to Asia) that have been embraced in Washington. Some analyses also include considerable reiteration of the China threat argument that had already been thoroughly covered, and more homage to Marshall.

James Thomas and Evan Montgomery’s distinctive contribution is that Washington should “opportunistically capitalize on China’s internal dynamics” (p. 268). This non-technology-oriented suggestion is refreshing in its acknowledgement that Beijing parallels Washington regarding the role of organizational and personal politics, and that it is not a monolithic entity with one united view on almost everything, especially toward the West generally and the United States specifically. James Fitzsimmonds’s second chapter, “Cultural Barriers to Implementing a Competitive Strategy,” is a balanced consideration of future U.S.-China relations, and possible courses for the United States to pursue to better its strategic position. Perhaps most important, it examines how circum-

stances today are different from those of the Cold War, a perspective absent in many of the prior chapters.

This brief summarization of the contents brings me to how the volume might have been enhanced. As noted earlier, there was a time lag between the conference and the book publication; intervening events and policy changes affect the timeliness of the arguments made. Nonetheless, there are some obvious gaps that if filled, would have strengthened the overall bearing of the book. First and foremost, while considerable attention is paid to comparative strategies during the Cold War, the book would have benefited from a chapter focusing on how globalization, versus a bipolar world, optimizes or complicates utilization of comparative strategies. Globalization is, quite simply, given short shrift in this analysis. While the Cold War certainly provides lessons to learn from, it is important to consider how things have changed so as not to learn the wrong lessons from the past.

In his conclusion, however, Mahnken continues to look to the past, stating that “more work nonetheless should be done to understand the dynamics of the Cold War” (p. 301). Perhaps there is an unwritten implication of that being done toward differentiating past Cold War circumstances to those of a globalized era. I would have liked to have seen more from Mahnken in general, as beyond editing, his total contribution to the book is about fourteen pages, and clearly he has much more he could have substantively added to the discussion, based on his extensive and impressive experience.

Perhaps part of the historical bent of the book is reflective of the orientation of the Strategy and Policy Department of the Naval War College that sponsored the conference, and where Mahnken, Lee, Holmes, Yoshihara, and, formerly, Michael Chase teach. In that regard, a note of full disclosure must accompany my second suggestion. I would have liked to see a contribution in part 1

from someone in the National Security Affairs Department (NSA), where I teach. It is in the NSA strategies sub-course where special attention is paid to the development of American grand strategy, as well as deterrence theory, which is linked to competitive strategies by Chase and Andrew Erickson in their chapter on China’s Second Artillery. Inclusion of a chapter that draws from current international relations theory might have usefully broadened the rationale for utilization of a comparative strategies approach beyond Cold War lessons.

Third, part 3 would have benefited considerably from a chapter that gave a different perspective from the nearly relentless dichotomous characterization of U.S.-China relations, from the portrayal of the United States as peace loving to the point of almost being a sap, and from the idea that China focused almost solely on thwarting the United States in Asia. The essays include some notations of differences between the Cold War and the current situation and more nuanced views of the U.S.-China relationship. Holmes, for example, states that “successive U.S. administrations, furthermore, have deliberately avoided wholeheartedly competing with China. There are both competitive and cooperative strains to the U.S.-China relationships, marking a stark contrast with the overwhelmingly competitive U.S.-Soviet relationship” (p. 137). Elaboration on the complexity of the U.S.-China relationship would have substantially enhanced the competitive strategies rationale. If Holmes is right, perhaps this says more about how economics has come to trump defense in national security. As the 2006 visit of the Chinese president revealed, Washington state—where Hu Jintao made his first stop—was more important than Washington DC due to meetings at Boeing and Microsoft. Here too, perhaps inclusion of a chapter from NSA would have been useful, given its emphasis on regional studies.

Finally, a thread that runs through many chapters is the idea that in order for competitive

strategies to be successfully employed a clear understanding of the focus country is needed. For example, Mahnken mentions “gaps in our understanding of competitors,” and Battilega discusses the importance of country target selection (p. 6). Given the complexity and largely opaque nature of China, this “understanding” prerequisite is critical, but consideration of the difficulties of understanding China is largely lacking in the text. Even in the narrow area of China-related issues where I work, the Chinese space program—considered in the text in several chapters regarding anti-satellite technology and U.S. reliance on space assets—problems with finding and employing reliable and useful sources of information have become increasingly obvious.[1] Additionally, useful information from technical communities often fails to reach policy communities. For example, the question raised regarding how “hard it would be to repair or replace” space assets lost in conflict with China has generally been addressed (p. 200).[2] Therefore, a chapter on the complexity of understanding China as a target of competitive strategies, and how that would complicate usage, would have been worthwhile, even at the expense of less material on the Cold War.

Perhaps because I am currently teaching a course with a significant writing instruction component and so am overly sensitive, there are occasional editorial issues that might have been easily rectified. Authors noted, for example, “authoritative publications,” that “Chinese military thinkers have published several key volumes,” and dilemmas being “well-documented,” without providing sources (pp. 214, 215, 219). Use of “space constraints” as justification for opening a topic but not explaining it sufficiently or allowing for unsupported speculation can become quickly overused (pp. 155, 163). And, in the chapter by Babbage, there is too much reliance on too few sources.

In conclusion, if looking for a primer on comparative strategies, this book provides solid infor-

mation. One must be willing, however, to wade through some repetition, considerable Cold War history, and a view of U.S.-China relations that is somewhat dated and narrow. The theoretical premises, however, are valid, interesting, and clearly worthy of further, expanded consideration.

#### Notes

[1]. See Gregory Kulacki and Joan Johnson-Freese, “Significant Errors in Testimony on China’s Space Program,” May 20, 2008, <http://www.ucsus.org/nuclear-weapons-and-global-security/international-information/us-china-relations/significant-errors-in.html>; Joan Johnson-Freese and Gregory Kulacki, “Chinese Spaceplane: Chimera or Object Lesson in Threat Analysis?” *AOL Defense*, September 27, 2012, <http://defense.aol.com/2012/09/27/chinese-spaceplane-chimera-or-object-lesson-in-threat-analysis/>; and Gregory Kulacki and David Wright, “New Questions about U.S. Intelligence on China: An Analysis of the March 2005 Report by the U.S. National Air and Space Intelligence Center,” September 15, 2005, <http://www.ucsus.org/assets/documents/nwgs/nasic-analysis-final-9-15-05.pdf>.

[2]. Geoffrey Forden, “How China Loses the Coming Space War,” *Wired*, January 10, 2008, <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2008/01/in-side-the-chin/>.

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