'Strategic Competition' in International Relations: Scope and Impact Factors

Tran Nam Tien

Associate Professor, Ph.D, VNUHCM-University of Social Sciences and Humanities
Email: trannamtienqhqt@gmail.com

Abstract: *At present, strategic competition among great powers is fierce, strongly affecting the regions and the world. The strategic competition between the great powers entails the gathering of forces of the great powers leading to geopolitical and geo-economic fluctuations and directly affecting the interests of other countries at the global and regional levels. On that basis, the article focuses on presenting: 1) The basic connotations of "competition" and "strategic competition" from the perspective of international relations; and 2) Variables affecting "strategic competition" in international relations today.*

1. "Competition" and "Strategic Competition" from the perspective of international relations

The Sino-Vietnamese Dictionary defines "competition" as "a contest to win or lose" (Nguyen Van Khon, 1960). *The Encyclopedic Dictionary of Vietnam* (Volume 1) interprets competition as "competitive activities among commodity producers, businessmen and entrepreneurs in a market economy, governed by supply and demand relationship to obtain the most favourable production, consumption and market conditions" (Vietnamese Encyclopedia Compilation Steering Board, 1995: 357). "Competition" also appears in sports, business or scientific fields, where it often involves the pursuit of relative success within a framework composed of certain rules or norms.

"Competition" in diplomacy is seen as an approach that "emphasizes assertiveness rather than empathy. Competitors see winning as a goal" (Robert et al, 2004: 51). "Competition" is therefore concerning combat and can be identified or measured by specific parameters. In political science, "competition" is understood as "conflict", referring to "a struggle or contest between people with opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, values, or goals" (Emily, Thomas, 2007: 2).

"Competition", in a narrower sense, is perceived as akin to "a state of war". In essence, conflict or war is a special form of "competition" at its most intense, in which actors attempt to outperform their opponents in a complete conflict (Jeffrey et al., 2015: 9-21); "competition" is normally thought of as a "battle" in which each party

(or either side) attempts to increase its power and influence, often in direct relation to its competitors. Thus, "competition" implies some degree and intensity of antagonism, even "hostility".

The term "strategy" is derived indirectly from the Greek "strategos", which means 'a general' in an army. By the time of Alexander the Great, "strategy" was used to refer to leadership skills to take advantage of forces, defeat opponents, and build a system of domination. In Europe, the notion of "strategy" was spread from the military to the business realm in the late nineteenth century, and to the state administration in the twentieth century. In the first edition of *Makers of Modern Strategy* (1943), Edward Meade Earleset defined strategy as follows: "Strategy is the art of controlling and utilizing the resources of a nation - or a coalition - including its armed forces, to the end that its vital interests shall be effectively promoted and secured against enemies, actual, potential, or merely presumed" (Edward, 1943: viii). In an article on strategy published in 2000, Richard K. Betts argued: "Strategy is the essential ingredient for making war either politically effective or morally tenable. It is the link between military means and political ends…" (Richard, 2000: 5).

Eliot Cohen explained in an article in *The Washington Post* 2009, "Strategy is the art of choice that binds means with objectives, and it involves priorities, sequencing and a theory of victory" (Eliot, 2009: 1). The word "strategy" in the broad sense is also understood as the importance of global, pivotal and relatively long-term value in terms of time. As a result, strategy is a collection of guidelines and tactics planned to determine goals, arrange, gather forces and propose solutions to achieve a certain goal for maximum profits, creating a new developmental stage in a realm, society as a whole or the whole world in a given period (Institute of Strategy and Science for Public Security, 2005: 211). Strategy as "a plan" often conveys a long-term sense of time, while strategy as "a scheme" has a short-term sense of time with a long-term goal.

Thus, merging the two concepts of "competition" and "strategy" into the "strategic competition" in international relations is to express the idea of the rivalry and struggle of a country or an alliance with its rivals through the mottos, tactics and policies planned for a certain period, aiming to realize the objectives associated with the stated national interests to achieve superiority over an opponent, or winning about position, power, influence or interest in the all "competitive" aspects.

The notions of "competition" or "strategic competition" are rarely referred from a theoretical perspective, regardless of their obvious significance to models of international relations (Kenneth, 2000: 5-41). In the context of international relations, "strategic competition" can be understood as a state of competing relationship, mainly for influence but not in direct armed conflict between actors, reflecting the three basic distinguishing factors mentioned earlier: perceived contention, efforts to gain a common advantage, and pursuit of a good outcome that is often unavailable. This implies that competing actors pursuit a common limited goal of power, influence, prosperity and status. In international relations theory, in terms of "interests", actors take into account the ways used to achieve benefits, unilaterally placing their

interests above the ones of others instead of adjusting their actions for the common good, leading to competition in the course of cooperation. While an effort to seek one's advantage does not means damage to that of the other party, it is an actor's self-directed behaviour that is not constrained by any sense of the interests of others.

Given the above perspectives, "strategic competition" from the viewpoint of international relations theory and practice can be understood more broadly as: "Competition in international relations realm means one actor's efforts to gain influence; i.e, striving to pose a challenge or threat while being in pursuit of their goals of power, security, wealth, influence, and status". Accordingly, it is assumed that countries (or groups of countries) are strategically competing for such broader goals as global leadership; and the ability to define or determine results, especially in international affairs or in realms critical to their national interests in parallel with the specific goals of security and greed (See: Charles, 2010: 35-40). China is a typical case. Rising from the beginning of the 21st century, China surely competes to fulfil its goals of further influence in the region and a global position on par with the United States, apart from maintaining its security and territorial integrity. Thus, the competition for influence between China and the United States is no longer at the regional level but has upgraded to a global level (Ali, 2015: 147-187; Michael, Sarah, Julie, 2018: 109-115). Competition does not only take place between "rivals", but also among partners or allies in a specific matter such as economy or position, which is illustrated by the post-cold war tension between the United States of America and

EU countries for the economic interests and influence in Western Europe.

By definition, we can see that competitive behaviour is just one of several possible tactics or strategies to achieve national goals. This approach differs from the category of cooperation (actors seek similar goals by coordinating together for the common good) and does not include strategies that unilaterally but not competitively promote national interests. Thus, it shows that the notion of strategic competition necessarily involves the pursuit of a relative degree of success in comparison with other actors, rather than just one's own efforts to improve for the sake of its interests. This perspective is considered to be consistent with the realist theory, where it argues that the international system is a forum for competition, in which states seek to outrun each other in pursuit of high-profile goals such as power and international status. In the realist approach, a single major goal of the competition between actors is "power" or security (Hans, 1993: 5). These ideological approaches make a clear distinction between the political-military spheres of competition and all others, between forms of material power and non-material one, status and prestige, and influence.

Multiple goals that lead to national competition are also identified, some of which are intangible (such as status) and some that are strictly economic, which are not necessarily just goals of military competition or others. Competition between actors in international relations can appear in many forms and many different ways, and the competitive objectives that countries focus on can also change over time. Therefore, several countries develop competition policies in the present, also

plan a long-term strategy in the future. The United States, for example, apart from planning to compete with China in key areas (East Sea, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Middle East, etc.) and now competes at the global level (primarily on trade), have to judge what particular form of competition it will face with China in the next decade (See: Ben, 2019: 102- 113).

After examining relevant definitions from international relations theoretical perspectives, "strategic competition" is perceived as a particular "phenomenon" in international relations. The process of strategic competition is characterized differently and countries relying on their strengths can compete in different ways even in the same strategic competition. A country needs to review the characteristics, capacities, objectives and contents of its rivals' strategies to ensure the success of its responding strategies in a particular strategic competition. This understanding is crucial to help a country come up with effective strategies, policies and tools in the competition.

2. Variables affecting "strategic competition" in international relations

Based on theories and historical practices, the variables leading actors to participate in "strategic competition" in international relations today are as follows:

The first variable of interest to international relations scholars is the political regime of a country, which can be understood as a matter of "ideology", derived from the "democratic peace" theory holding that democracies are less likely to fight each other (Michael, 1986: 1151-1169). This theory offers a variety of reasons for such models, from the checks and balances in democratic systems to the habit of peaceful settlement of disputes realized by

societies in history. According to Jack Levy, this is perhaps the fact that comes as close as anything we have to an empirical law in international relations (Jack, 1988: 653-673). Most proponents of democratic peace theory argue that various factors explain the peaceful relationship between capitalist democracies, which stem from the very nature of their internal politics, as well as their relationship with each other in the international political system[1]. It means that countries that do not share the same political system, specifically differing in "ideologies", will easily engage in "strategic competition", even possible conflict and war (Hensel et al., 2000: 1173-1188). In the current international context, China's rise with "ideology" different from those of democracies will be the factor that creates strategic competition with other democracies varies at different levels, that is, Sino-American, India-China strategic competitions.

The second variable that is taken into account to assess the competitors in the "strategic competition" is the actor's "identity" related to the "national interest". A country's identity is partly reflected in the perception of its cultural and social values, historical roles and political ambitions, which are believed to play a crucial role and sometimes dominant in shaping perceptions of interests, goals, and behaviours (Alexander, 1992: 391-425)[2]. Therefore, identity is the most

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[1] However, several other theoretical schools criticize this argument because democracies claim to be peaceful must in essence maintain peaceful relations with democratic and non-democratic states. However, democratic states wage or participate in and support wars against non-democratic states as much as wars perpetrated by non-democratic states themselves, and instability still exists in international relations.

[2] See also Glenn, Michael, Benjamin for commentaries in this direction, 1999.

basic 'filter' of countries to interpret the characteristics of strategic competition, the participating actors' goals, and the effects that lead to their competitive position. In many cases, however, the rise of many states that emphasize 'identity' can lead to natural, inevitable "strategic competitions" to which extent they are likely to lead to conflicts and wars. In the current international structure and the context of globalization, the identity of the emerging powers and their national interests in economic development has become the main themes that define their international position and foreign policy. From a psychological perspective, the combination of perception with emotion and identity easily creates what Thucydides calls "fear" of the ruling power and "arrogance" of the rising power. As Joseph Nye has shown, the hostile prediction is the self-fulfilling prophecies where anything either actor does is seen by the other as a hostile effort to replace or contain it (Joseph, 2018). For example, China, as an international player, is now building a society "with Chinese characteristics" that is different in terms of "ideology" and "identity" from many other countries. China considers itself the obvious hegemon of the region according to the ideology of "Sinocentrism" (以華为中), having the potential and ideological power/soft power to exercise its superior to other countries. Thus, China's national identity will govern its behaviour with other great powers in the strategic competition (Xiaoyu, 2017: 131-149).

The third variable is considered the "personality" of the strategic competitors, revealed in the fact that a great power is not satisfied with its current position inappropriate to its current strength and thereby intends to revise the existing international relations order. The international relations theories attempt to identify patterns of emerging powers that would like to disrupt existing orders and engage in frequent and destabilizing forms of competition driven by the need to subvert or change the existing international system. This personality type belongs to "revisionist" states, which will both provoke and exacerbate the nature and extent of strategic competition with their rivals as established powers. The interests of "revisionist" states often contrast with those of the established powers that are content with the existing international or world order. If the established powers have this personality, the strategic competition will be more complex and tense. Thus, the rise of a great power breaks the status quo and creates the resulting structural tension that made violent clashes the norm without exception.

Take the current China-US strategic competition as an example. Despite their many differences, China and the United States have one thing in common: self-righteousness is pushed to the extreme. The United States has always considered itself a cultural superiority, so it is difficult to accept competition and may be replaced by an Asian country that was once despised and hated by them as "degenerate, weak, corrupt and incompetent". While China, through its long history of development, considers itself the greatest empire, the centre of the civilized world, and has the right to educate the surrounding peoples. Experiencing the century of humiliation (百年國恥) due to being occupied by Western countries, including the United States, is only a memory to be forgotten and an anomaly of history, where the Chinese

are still honourable and unique. It is also a factor that strongly promotes China's rise, fulfilling the "Chinese dream" to dominate the "underworld: (天下)[1]. As the economic and political relationship between China and the United States has dropped to an all-time low and their conflicts have escalated, it's warned that the United States and China may be caught up in the crossfire into the "Thucydides trap"[2], which could trigger a new cold war. Therefore, the current "strategic competition" between the two countries is likely to make implications and a sense of self-regulation not only for China but also for the United States to avoid falling into the trap (See: Alan, 2019: 31-41).

The fourth variable is related to the internal affairs of actors in "strategic competition" and measures to evaluate their "personality" through the practice of operating the national apparatus as well as referencing historical lessons, political actors and domestic interests in various types and influences critical in shaping their personality in international relations (Andrew, 1997: 513-553; See also: Jack, 1991). This variable in capitalist countries is reflected in the role of interest groups, ideological groups, political parties and alliances with the government. In particular, the government apparatus

can be a notable influence factor on the national decisions when participating in international relations, especially in strategic competitions. While in some other countries, conflicts between domestic interest groups such as the political party apparatus, the military, and sometimes non-governmental actors such as religion, can have a significant impact on national decisions in the strategic competition. In several cases, different political interest groups have played an important role in promoting conflict, even war (e.g. Germany during World War I, 1914-1918) or hinder a country's ambition to establish the international status (the United States in the 1930s).

Finally, a variable that governs the behaviour of states in a strategic competitive environment is the role of the nation's leaders or leadership groups. The leader's perspective acts as a "filter" for all of the other variables mentioned above. Specifically, hardline leaders are more likely to choose fierce competition and even conflict, while moderate ones are easier to accept the status quo or do not accept risks, so they seek a compromise solution, share power for peaceful coexistence, and even power shift in peace. History has shown that the behaviour of states arises from the actions and interactions of individuals, namely, national leaders. Wars can therefore be waged to satisfy the power aspirations of a nation's leader. In many cases, war is the result of the personal illusions, opinions, preferences, or miscalculations of leaders when pushing the "strategic competition" to a high level as Adolf Hitler when he led Germany to launch the Second World War in a strategic competition with the Western powers at that time. Overall, the views and decisions of national leaders or

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[1] 许纪霖 (2015), "新天下主义: 重建中国的内外秩序", 载许纪霖, 刘擎主编: "新天下主义" ("知识分子论丛" 第13辑), 上海: 上海人民出版社, 页 3-25.

[2] Thucydides's Trap implies that war is a natural tendency when a new center of power emerges threatening to replace the old one. The 'Thucydides Trap' is named after the ancient Greek historian Thucydides, who made observations about the war between the newly emerging city-state Athens and the old ruling power, the city-state Sparta. The war for power between the two parties was one of the reasons why the ancient Greece weakened and collapsed.

leadership groups can become particularly significant in shaping a state's competitive posture, needs, and the nature of strategic competition itself (Fakhreddin et al., 2015: 166-171; Michael et al., 2018: 17).

3. Conclusion

In summary, from the perspective of international relations, the category of "strategic competition" can be understood as a status of the contest without direct armed conflict between the parties, which implies competing actors share a common goal of power, influence, prosperity, and status. The international relations theory and practice define the notion of strategic competition as within the framework of international relations involving an actor's efforts to gain influence over others by posing a challenge or threat in the pursuit of goals such as power, security, wealth, influence, and status. From a theoretical perspective, realism is an approach that fits the category of "strategic competition" between actors for common goals of power or security.

Strategic competition is a typical phenomenon in international relations today. Besides, actors or groups of actors will be significantly influenced by impact variables, specifically, a nation's political regime (ideology), its identity and personality, state administrative apparatus and the rather crucial role of its leader or group of national leaders. It can be said that these variables have a great impact on the process and content of strategic competition in international relations today ❑

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