

Air Command and Staff Commentaries

US Grand Strategy and the Rise of China

Over the course of the last two decades, the economic and military growth of China prompted a shift in the international system, and now presents a challenge to what some consider the US-led international order. Identified as a return to great power competition by the US Department of Defense, the Congressional Research Service has called for, among other things, renewed conversations regarding “grand strategy and the geopolitics of great power competition as a starting point for discussing US defense issues.”¹

The manuscripts contained in this package present a record of the grand strategic viewpoints of students at the Air Command and Staff College for the 2021 academic term. Each manuscript is a response to the final exam prompt for the International Security I core course, *The Context of International Security*. The course presents various academic perspectives regarding international security, with a focus on US national security and the US national interest, as well as the tools at its disposal for the attainment of security and interests. The students are introduced to broad frameworks by which US national security can be conceived. These “traditions” of International Relations (IR) present distinct and contrasting perspectives on the causes of war, the conditions of peace, and in turn, what counts as national security. Students are then introduced to the debate over US grand strategy in the 21st century and explore the instruments by which national interests and objectives may be pursued and obtained (diplomacy, information, military and economics, or DIME). These traditions, strategies, and tools are then applied to various challenges in the strategic environment, including the rise of China.

For the final, students were asked to *derive a strategy to address the challenge of a rising China to US national security*. While the question is uniform, the reader will find that the responses are far from it. The answers in the student submissions range from security cooperation and developing a relationship of reciprocity to unilateral military dominance in the East Asian complex. The primary commonality across the submissions is their implicit consensus that strategy begins with the setting of political objectives and should be assessed and reassessed with that object in mind. This applies when implementing any instrument of power, whether it be diplomatic statecraft, information and strategic communication, or military coercion. While some prescriptions may be more feasible than others in the eyes of the reader, “visionary” projects containing aspirational ideals are good starting points for conversations about political facts and realities. It is the purpose of

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these commentaries to revisit existing conversations, as well as to begin new ones, concerning the future of US grand strategy as the world around us shifts.

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1. Congressional Research Service, *Renewed Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense – Issues for Congress*, CRS Report R43838, updated 3 December 2020.