

# A Study of East Asian Security in Sino-American Strategic Competition

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## Abstract

By using the comprehensive framework for security analysis of international system theory and intervening variables of policy-making in international relations, this article studies East Asian security in Sino-American strategic competition. After analyzing the discourses relevant with the US's cognition of China in *United States Innovation and Competition Act of 2021* from domestic, regional, inter-regional, and global levels, this article discovers that in the US's eyes, China is a strong country and its approaching capability in the international system has already seriously impacted the existing international system and threatened its own hegemony, but China has its own problems domestically and its relations with its neighbors are very tense. Inferring from the US's logic, it is discovered that the objective and subjective factors function positively and negatively to East Asian security, respectively. This article finally proposes five ways to reduce the risk of wars in East Asia.

**Keywords:** US's Cognition of China, comprehensive framework for security analysis, Sino-American strategic competition, "strategic competition act of 2021", East Asian security

## 1. Introduction

After China and the US entered the era of strategic competition, the increasingly tense bilateral relation has seriously influenced global peace and stability. "Security" (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013: 5), especially East Asian security, has become the focus of many countries. Considering whether competition will lead to war, there are three kinds of opinions. (A) the future is uncertain. Zhu (2013: 154) alertly predicts that "Sino-U.S. relations ... have already turned into competitive relations ... It is still uncertain how the regional security order will evolve, and how the countries in the region will respond to or deal with the Sino-U.S. competition for the regional strategic competition, and the whole region is now facing unprecedented challenges". Liang (2019: 123) discovers that the competition reflects "the unprecedented uncertainty of China-US relations in the new era", which "not only affects the two countries, but also has an important impact on regional and global affairs". (B) The competition is controllable. Liu (2017: 65) thinks that "to avoid directly challenging the existing international order on the global level, and prevent secondary regional powers from counterbalancing a rising China", it is "imperative for China to properly manage the intensity and magnitude of Sino-U.S. strategic competition". Liu & Sun (2020: 127) discovers that "a rising China's adherence to strategic hedging ... can not only effectively moderate its dilemma of rising powers, but also help prevent China and the U.S. from being trapped into the Soviet-U.S. bloc confrontation in the Cold War era. The strategic hedging pattern is, therefore, likely to be sustained in East Asia in the coming decade". Zhang & Xu (2021: 321) believe that "the deep integration of the international system and historical inertia of US-China interaction preclude the US's complete isolation from China ... competition does not necessarily lead to conflict". Qi & Zhu (2021: v) regards as long as China and the US "seek adequate controls in ... strategy, institution, technology and domestic policies", the "iron curtain of science and technology" and "new Cold War" would be prevented. (C) The competition is uncontrollable. Others believe that the competition will not only "have significant risks for both countries, ranging from competitive strategic armament through crisis and conflict escalation, to the threat or even use of nuclear weapons" (Dunn, 2021: 1), but also "have implications for various states having relations with both of these two major powers" (Gul et al., 2021: 1). The controversies are mainly caused by three reasons: first, the scholars have ignored *United States Innovation and Competition Act of 2021*, the documentary file of the US to initiate the

strategic competition; second, they haven't accurately studied the US's cognition of China on "domestic", "regional", "inter-regional", and "global" levels within "the comprehensive framework for security analysis" (Buzan, 2007: 185); third, they have overlooked the influence of "intervening variables", such as "logical dilemmas", "perceptual factors", and "political factors" (Buzan, 1983: 215), on American decision-making.

*United States Innovation and Competition Act of 2021* consists of seven parts, and the third part "Strategic Competition Act of 2021" is its embryo, containing a large number of discourses relevant with the US's cognition of China on the above mentioned four levels. So, this act is very suitable for East Asian security study. By using the comprehensive framework for security analysis to examine the relevant discourses on the four levels, this article can give a comprehensive study of the US's cognition of China. On the basis of accurately grasping the US's cognition of China on the four levels, and valuing the influence of intervening variables on American decision-making, this article can reveal the subjective and objective factors affecting East Asian security. Finally, this article can put forward some suggestions to decrease the East Asian security risk.

## 2. Method

The comprehensive framework for security analysis focuses on domestic, regional, inter-regional, and global levels relevant with security, and on each level the analytical focus and issues are different (See table 1).

**Table 1.** The Comprehensive Framework for Security Analysis (Buzan, 2007: 185)

Levels	Analytical Focus	Issues	Examples
Domestic	Weak/strong state	-Degree of social-political cohesion -Domestic political violence	-Strong state=Japan, Sweden -Weak state=Sri Lanka, Lebanon
Regional	Local/regional security complexes	-security interdependence -Amity/enmity -Polarity -Civilizational area -Subcomplexes -Domestic spillover	-Indian/Pakistan Iran/Iraq/Saudi Arabia -Israel/Arabs -Mono/bi/tri/multi -South Asia, Arabs -Gulf, Balkans, Horn -Kurds, Tamils, Palestinians
Inter-regional	Boundaries of indifference	-Cross-boundary links -Boundary change?	-Pakistan/Saudi Arabia -Gulf/Saudi Arabia
Global	Higher level, global security complex	-Great power polarity, rivalry -penetration: -to domestic level -to regional level -overlay -Adjacent to local security complex	-Cold war -US and Panama -Superpowers and Middle East -Colonial period -Europe 1945-90 -China/S.E. Asia China/S. Asia
Key questions: What are the security dynamics at each level for any given case? How of these dynamics interact with each other? What is the relative weight of each level in determining the security situation as a whole?			

With the help of this framework, this article first divides all the discourses relevant with the US's cognition of China onto the four levels, then studies the most important issues on each level around the analytical focus. Based on the

analysis of the US's cognition of China, this article finally analyzes the objective and subjective factors influencing East Asian security, and gives some suggestions to decrease East Asian security risk.

### 3. Results

This part examines the US's cognition of China on domestic, regional, inter-regional, and global levels, concentrating mainly on the most important issues around the analytical focus on each level.

#### 3.1 On Domestic Level

The purpose here is to judge whether China is a strong country or not, and the focus is on “[D]egree of social-political cohesion” and “[D]omestic political violence” (Buzan, 2007: 185).

In “Strategic Competition Act of 2021”, the US Congress states that “the PRC has chosen to pursue state-led, mercantilist economic policies, an increasingly authoritarian governance model at home ...” (2021: 716), and “(A) strong, centralized CCP leadership; (B) concentration of military power; (C) a strong role for the CCP in the state and the economy ...” (2021: 717). That is to say, the US regards that China achieves its present position not by the natural cohesion between society and politics, but by the strong and concentrated leadership of the CCP. So, it can be judged that in the US's eyes, although China now is a strong country, it has its own problems domestically. Obviously, the US's cognition of China's domestic issues is western-centred. It is true that China's success since 1949, especially since 1980s, is based on “socialism with Chinese characteristics” and the CCP's strong and centralized leadership. But that doesn't mean China has problems domestically, because, on the one hand, Chinese path to modernization is rooted in both its history and reality, on the other hand, except Western modernity, there is also “alternative modernity” (Wang, 2021: 399), for example, India, Brazil, South Africa, and other countries' modernities are different from Western modernity. If the US's western-centered mentality didn't change, it would probably misjudge China's domestic issues and try to stir political violence in China, which definitely would influence East Asian security.

#### 3.2 On Regional and Inter-Regional Levels

In East Asia, there are more than one security complexes: China and North Korea VS. Japan, North Korea VS. South Korea, South Korea VS. Japan, and China VS. Taiwan Region, the sub-country actor. Many security complexes have cross-boundary links. So, this article will analyze the US's cognition of China's relationships with different security complexes on the regional and inter-regional levels together. The focus is on “security interdependence”, “amity/enmity”, “polarity”, “civilizational area”, “subcomplexes” and “domestic spillover”, and “cross-boundary links” and “boundary change” (Buzan, 2007: 185).

In “Strategic Competition Act of 2021”, the US Congress states that “[T]he PRC plans to exploit Taiwan's dominant strategic position in the First Island Chain and to project power into the Second Island Chain and beyond” (2021: 724). Although the US hasn't narrated the details of China's relationships with different East Asian security complexes on the regional and inter-regional levels, from its narration it is not difficult to infer that in its eyes, except North Korea, China has tense relationships with other security complexes in East Asia. So, in order to curb China's rise, the US may try to unite South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan Region to oppose China, although South Korea and Japan also have tense relationships.

#### 3.3 On Global Level

On this level the focus is on “great power polarity, rivalry”, “penetration to domestic level and/or to regional level”, “overlay”, and “adjacent to local security complex” (Buzan, 2007: 185).

In “Strategic Competition Act of 2021”, the US Congress states that “[T]he People's Republic of China (PRC) is leveraging its ... power to become a strategic, near-peer, global competitor of the United States” (2021: 715). Obviously, the US has already viewed China as its biggest rival and the gap of their capabilities in the international system is not very broad. In the same act, the US states that “[T]he PRC is executing a plan to establish regional hegemony over the Indo-Pacific”(723), “the PRC is rapidly modernizing and expanding the capabilities of the PLA to project power and create areas across the entire Indo-Pacific regions” (930), “[T]he PRC capitalized on the world's attention to COVID-19 to advance its military objectives in the South China Sea, intensifying and accelerating trends already underway” (932), and “[T]hese actions in the South China Sea enable the PLA to exert influence and project power deeper into Oceania and the Indian Sea” (933). It can be seen that in the US's eyes, China's increasing capability has threatened not only countries within the South and Southeast Asian complexes, but also countries in Oceania. Thus, it can be inferred that the US believes most major powers in South and Southeast

Asian, even Oceanian security complexes, will unite together to curb China's rise. Although the US doesn't mention its military presence in Japan and South Korea, and its military help of Taiwan Region, it can be predicted that when the rivalry between China and the US becomes tenser, the US's power may overlay Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan Region. So, the US's presence may also increase the East Asian security risk.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 *An Assessment on East Asian Security*

The main purpose of the US to launch the strategic competition is to preserve the existing international system and its hegemony. Waltz believes that the structure is defined "according to the principle by which a system is ordered", "by the specification of functions of different units", and "by the distribution of capabilities across units" (1979: 100-101). Because international politics is "politics in the absence of government" (Fox, 1959: 35), the arranging principle of anarchy will not change, and because the international political system consists of "like units" (Waltz, 1979: 95), the functions of each unit are the same. So, the international system can only be transformed by changing the distribution of capabilities among units. Therefore, both the hegemonic and challenging countries are concerned with their capabilities in the international system. The former always pays attention to whether the latter's capability is likely to surpass itself, and the latter always looks for opportunities to surpass and replace the former. When any party believes that there is a possibility of change, security becomes an unavoidable issue.

Security includes "both subjective and objective factors" (Buzan, 1983: 105): "security, in an objective sense, measures the absence of threat to acquired value, in a subjective sense, the absence of fears that such values will be attacked" (Wolfers, 1952: 485). For the hegemonic country, its purpose is to preserve the acquired value or keep the feeling of owing such value; for the challenging country, its purpose is to obtain more value or increase the feeling of owing more value. Although both are concerned with their distribution of capabilities in the international system very much, their securities are by no means determined solely by their distribution of capabilities, because except their distribution of capabilities on the global level, their security is also determined by issues on the domestic, regional, and inter-regional levels, other issues on the global level, as well as by the intervening variables, such as logic dilemmas, perceptual factors, and political factors, in the process of security policy-making.

On the basis of fully considering the above factors, this section infers East Asian security along the US's logic: starting from the US's cognition of China on the four levels, this section first evaluates the objective factors' impact on East Asian security, and then evaluates the subjective factors' impact by introducing the above mentioned intervening variables.

#### 4.1.1 Impact of the Objective Factors

In the US's eyes, China is a strong country and its comprehensive national capability is rapidly approaching itself, which have already seriously impacted the existing international system and threatened its own hegemony, but in terms of China's domestic issues and its relations with its neighbors, it regards China has problems domestically and it can unite the major powers to curb China's rise. But the US's western-centered cognition of China cannot support itself to launch a face-to-face war against China, because it also needs to consider issues on the other levels, i.e., the impacts of Sino-American interaction and China's interactions with various security complexes.

China and the US have established diplomatic relations for more than 40 years and their interests are tightly intertwined in many fields. As China's comprehensive national capability rises to the second position in the world, both China and the US can't develop independently from each other. So, as far as Sino-American interaction is concerned, the historical inertia and the interdependent reality between them make it impossible for the US to launch a face-to-face war against China. However, this does not mean that the US will not provoke a proxy war. Presently the most possible places that the US may provoke a proxy war include the Sino-Indian border, the South China Sea, and the Taiwan Strait in East Asia.

Due to the friendly relations between China and Pakistan, India and Russia, and Russia and China, and the hostile relations between Pakistan and India, the US clearly knows that it is not easy to provoke a war near Sino-Indian borderline, which are proved by the diplomatic settlements of "Donglang confrontation" in 2017 and Sino-Indian border conflict in 2020.

Many historical and practical factors have complicated "Taiwan Question" and "the South China Sea Problem". Taiwan Region is an inseparable part of China, which is acknowledged by the US and most countries in the world. Taiwan Strait now is not only an important channel between East Asia, and the Middle East and Western Europe, but

also a crucial base for China to extend its military power to the Pacific Ocean. The US has signed the *Taiwan Relations Act* with Taiwan Region and made “Six Assurances” to it. Japan has colonized Taiwan Region for 50 years in history. Countries around the South China Sea are intertwined with many other countries, such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, India, and the US, and many international organizations, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the European Union (EU), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Therefore, many countries and organizations have paid close attention to the situations in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait. However, the US also knows that (a) the core matter Japan, South Korea, EU, NATO, and OPEC worry about is the safety of the trade channel across the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, and as long as China takes practical actions to dispel their worries, they may keep neutral or support China for their own interests; (b) ASEAN is obviously unwilling to burn the flames of war to its own doorstep, and undermine regional peace and stability; (c) countries around the South China Sea definitely would not entrust their fates to the external forces such as the US, and on the premise that China is willing to solve the maritime dispute with them privately, it is not easy for the US and other external forces to intervene; (d) no matter which party is in power in Taiwan Region, it is not foolish enough to declare “Taiwan separation” at the expense of war, moreover, China can use the opposition parties, Taiwan Region’s business organizations, and other forces to check and balance the ruling party, and prevent it from taking the step of “Taiwan separation”, and on the premise that both sides are willing to solve “Taiwan Question” by themselves, it is also not easy for the US and other external forces to intervene. So, different security complexes on many levels make it difficult for the US to initiate a proxy war in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait.

#### 4.1.2 Impact of Subjective Factors

Except being affected by objective factors, such as China and the US’s distribution of capabilities in the international system, the Sino-American interaction, and the interactions between China and various security complexes, the US’s possibility to provoke a proxy war in East Asia, especially in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, is also affected by the subjective factors during its decision-making.

First, in face of China’s rise, what the US chooses is “a national security strategy ... based largely within the threatened state” rather than “the international security strategy ... (based) on the adjustment of relations between states”. If this strategy is chosen, “[V]ulnerabilities can be reduced by increasing self-reliance, and countervailing forces can be built up to deal with specific threats. If the threats are military, then they can be met by strengthening one’s own military forces, by seeking alliances, or by hardening the country against attack. Economic threats can be met by increasing self-reliance, diversifying sources of supply, or learning to do without” (Buzan, 1983: 218). Obviously, this strategy can only intensify Sino-American competition, reduce their interdependence, and increase the risk of wars.

Second, the “perceptual factors” determined by the “position perspectives” and “constitutional factors” also profoundly affect the American decision-making. The position perspectives refer to “where the observer located in relation to the thing viewed” and “vary in time and space”; The constitutional factors refer to “the internal constitution of the viewer” and “reflect the sensory capability, historical memory and psychological make-up of the viewer” (226-227). Considering its position perspectives, it can be discovered that because of its long-term hegemonic position in the world, the US is difficult to make a relatively objective evaluation of itself. Influenced by the inflated evaluations of its own capability, the US definitely would not accept the result of ruling the world together with China or being replaced by China. The above analysis that the US is fully confident about its countering ways and procedure, is satisfied with its countering results, and believes that it can win the competition can prove this point. In terms of the constitutional factors, although China and the US have experienced the harmonious relations after the normalization of their diplomatic relations, the historical memory of struggling for hegemony with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the tradition of private ownership and free economy, and the capitalist ideology have more profound influences on the US. Both the two aspects of perceptual factors will urge the US to view China as a challenger, increasing the risk of wars in East Asia.

Finally, “[W]ithin the state exist many layers of sub-state actors, ranging from the government and its various bureaucratic organs, through the economic, political and media organizations, to the individual citizens, both as individuals, and as the amorphous entity known as public opinion” (Buzan, 1983: 233), who will exert influences on American decision-making for their own interests. These sub-state actors’ unified opinions on curbing China also increase the risk of wars in East Asia.

In a word, inferring from the US’s logic, the objective factors, such as the US and China’s distribution of capabilities in the international system, the Sino-American interaction, and the interactions between China and various security

complexes, will constrain the US to initiate a proxy war to some extent, but the subjective factors, such as its choice of national security strategy, the perceptual factors consisting of position perspectives and constitutional factors, and the sub-state actors' opinions, will increase the risk of wars in East Asia.

#### *4.2 Possible Ways to Reduce the Risk of Wars*

Based on the above analysis, this section discusses the possible ways to reduce the risk of wars in East Asia on different levels as follows:

Way 1: Focusing on the international system to reconcile Sino-American relations. This approach belongs to “the international security strategy”, concentrating on “the sources and causes of threats”. The purpose is not to “block or offset the threat”, but to “reduce or eliminate them by political action” (Buzan, 1983: 219). It has a number of advantages: “it addresses the security logic of level 3 (the international system) squarely, and offers a prospect of a much more efficient security policy than that available with a national security strategy”. But it also has its own problems: “where a power struggle is in operation, the basic conditions for an international strategy cannot be met” (220). This strategy no doubt is the best choice to alleviate the pressure of Sino-American confrontation and to reduce the risk of wars in East Asia. However, its effectiveness must be based on China and the US's mutual trust and frankness. For the two countries that are already in fierce confrontation, this requires not only political wisdom, but also broad mind.

Way 2: Focusing on the interfaces across different levels to re-balance powers. All major parties' interests within the security complexes on the interfaces across the relevant countries/Taiwan Region and the international system, and across the relevant countries/Taiwan Region and the organizations below them should be considered. New balance of powers can be formed by redistribution of capabilities between and within these security complexes. For example, by promising South Korea, Japan, EU, NATO, and OPEC that it will not block the waterways in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, China can reduce its pressures in East Asia; by encouraging the opposition parties, all kinds of organizations, and the public to restrain the ruling parties' risky diplomatic policies within East Asia countries/Taiwan Region, China can keep East Asia's present peaceful status; by organizing all the relevant countries around the South China Sea to solve the dispute without external forces, China can reach some consensuses with them; by talking directly with Taiwan Region without the external interference, China can push forward the steps of peacefully solving the Taiwan Question.

Way 3: Focusing on Sino-American interaction to ease tensions. First, both China and the US should value their mutual benefiting history since the establishment of diplomatic relations between them, seeing the healthy trend of Sino-American relations over more than 40 years, and trying to eliminate suspicion and estrangement. Second, both China and the US should realize that once the two strongest countries, which have already deeply entangled together in almost every aspect, have left the track of benign competition and moved towards confrontation, it would bring disasters for both of them and the international community. When both of them have suffered the pains caused by unrestrained competition, dragging them back to the negotiating table and persuading them with history and reality may be the best way to ease tensions and reduce security risks.

Way 4: Focusing on China to increase its capability in the international system. For China, which can currently compete with the US in terms of its “size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence” (Buzan, 1979: 131), improving its own comprehensive national capability is not only a valuable experience of its rapid rise, but also a major way to change the pattern of the unipolar system. However, this approach has no difference with the US's current approach to contain China, i.e., both belong to the national security strategy. When both sides choose this strategy, the confrontations between them will only be intensified and the interactions will only become less and less, which will inevitably lead to conflicts and war. The war will have three outcomes: China defeats the US and the world enters into the most secure bipolar system (173-174); the US defeats China and the unipolar system is more stable; both China and the US are weakened by the war, other countries rise, and the world enters into a multipolar system with characteristics of “[I]nterdependence of parties, diffusion of dangers, confusion of responses” (171).

Way 5: Focusing on the US to influence its decision-making. First, the American policy-makers should see the different results by adopting national security strategy and international security strategy to compete with China, and wisely chooses the latter as its strategy. Second, the US must realize that the hegemonic mentalities, the memory of the Cold War, the tradition of private ownership and free economy, and the capitalist ideology belong to the irrational “affectual” and “traditional” (Weber, 1968: 25) social actions, and try to get rid of the negative impacts of irrational perceptual factors on its decision-making. Finally, taking advantage of the problems in American domestic political structure, East Asian countries should try to divide the US's aggressive forces to reduce the risk of wars.

The five ways have their own advantages and disadvantages, and are by no means all the strategies to reduce the risk of wars in East Asia. The changing international situation inevitably requires the decision-makers to fully examine the situations, carefully weigh different strategies, and scientifically make demonstrations. Therefore, the five ways listed in this section are just academic discussions under the guidance of the international system theory rather than real policies for the policy-makers.

## 5. Conclusion

By analyzing the discourses relevant with the US's cognition of China in "Strategic Competition Act of 2021" from the domestic, regional, inter-regional, and global levels, this article discovers that in the US's eyes, (a) China's increasing capability in the international system has already impacted the existing international system and threatened its own hegemony, (b) China has its own problems domestically, and (c) China's relationships with East, South, and Southeast Asian security complexes are very tense, and it can unite the major powers to curb China's rise. Inferring from the US's logic, this article discovers that objective factors, such as China and the US's distribution of capabilities in the international system, the Sino-American interaction, and the interactions between China and various security complexes, can restrain the US from initiating wars in East Asia, while various subjective factors affecting the American decision-making, such as its choice of national security strategy, the perceptual factors consisting of position perspectives and constitutional factors, and the sub-state actors' hostile attitudes towards China, may play the opposite role. Under the international system theory, East Asia can reduce its risk of wars from different levels, i.e., the international system, the interfaces across different levels, Sino-American interaction, China, and the US. In reality, decision-making needs to consider the advantages and disadvantages of all the possible strategies. Compared with traditional East Asian security studies, this article not only successfully applies the comprehensive framework for security analysis to East Asian security study, providing a scientific, objective, convenient, and feasible operation paradigm for international relations study, but also reveals the subjective and objective factors that affect East Asian security in Sino-American strategic competition, further more, it provides a variety of possible strategies to reduce the risk of wars in East Asia.

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