The Cold War analogy's misrepresentation of the essence of US–China strategic competition

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Received: 14 September 2020 / Accepted: 3 November 2020 / Published online: 12 November 2020
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Abstract

The gradual deterioration of the US–China relationship during the Trump era has inspired the development of diverse theoretical approaches to grasping the essence of the two countries' recent great power rivalry. Although the Cold War analogy is a useful heuristic for making sense of the dynamics of the US–China strategic competition, it is based on the bygone US–Soviet relationship, and thus may lead to misunderstandings about the particular logic of the current US–China relationship. The pitfalls of relying on the Cold War analogy include motivated bias, cognitive bias resulting from framing effects, and potentially missing the real causal variable driving the rivalry. Historical analogies are necessary but not sufficient for grasping the nature of the US–China case. Instead, scholars should ascend the ladder of abstraction to escape the conceptual stretching problem that contributes to misunderstandings in studies of the dynamics of the US–China strategic competition.

Keywords US–China relationship · Strategic competition · Cold war analogy · Essence of bilateral relations

1 Introduction

Since Donald Trump administration issued the United States' new National Security Strategy in late 2017 (The White House 2017) and defined China as a strategic rival, the US–China bilateral relationship has entered a new period of strategic competition that is broadly recognized in both the US and China. With the escalation of rhetoric from Vice President Mike Pence (2018), Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (2020), and President Trump himself, the Trump administration has seemingly adopted a fragmented but logically coherent “Cold War” strategic mentality with regard to China. Before early 2018, Trump's primary security issue was the North Korean nuclear crisis. In Trump's eyes, the most influential variable for the

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de-escalation of US–North Korean tensions was China’s strategic support. With UN sanctions, issued with China’s agreement, rapprochement between North Korea and the US dramatically appeared in early 2018. This then freed President Trump’s hands to address the issue of the United States’ trade deficit with China, leading to the first stage of the US–China trade war (2018 to 2020). After US–China trade negotiations produced a phase one deal in January 2020, the bilateral relationship slipped into a new and unfortunate stage. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic not only closed the window for cooperation between the two countries, but also escalated conflict, both in terms of public opinion and strategic confrontation, on issues including human rights, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the South China Sea, and economic decoupling. Tragically, the US–China bilateral relationship is slipping toward a much more pessimistic future. This situation draws out the following empirical puzzle: what happened between the two powers, and why did they begin to march towards a conflict-oriented relationship? Further, what paradigm should be used to describe the essence and dynamics of the US–China strategic competition?

The dramatic change in the US–China relationship, which is the latest instance of major power competition, has led to the production of abundant thoughtful theoretical approaches to describing the basic dimensions of the US–China strategic competition and explaining its origins, dynamics, and potential future. Historical analogy is naturally the most common analytical tool for most scholarly work on the strategic competition between US and China. The Thucydides Trap proposed by Graham Allison (2017) and the Cold War analogy (Khong 2019; Li 2020) are the most prominent examples of this. While a consensus exists regarding the change in the relationship between the two powers, no consensus has been reached concerning the essence of the US–China strategic competition. More specifically, the question of which theoretical concept is most appropriate and suggestive with regard to analyzing the US–China strategic competition is still under debate. Historical analogies can help national decision-makers and researchers grasp the essence of contemporary international relations. However, it can also fail to recognize fundamental differences in newer competitions, and its misapplication can even lead unintended consequences, such as conflict by means of self-fulfilling prophecy. To borrow the constructivist Alexander Wendt’s (1992) phrasing, the new Cold War will be what researchers and national decision-makers make of it. This paper does not seek to develop a new historical concept or analogy to capture the essence of the ongoing US–China strategic competition, but rather intends to encourage reflection on the methodology employed by current research on the US–China strategic competition and discuss the unintended effects of the Cold War analogy from the perspectives of cognitive and linguistic psychology. In the conclusion, I demonstrate the right direction for grasping the essence of the US–China strategic competition and why historical analogy is a misleading approach to the topic. This paper aims not to entirely deny the utility of historical analogy for better understanding vital features of contemporary strategic competition, but rather to propose that the idea of “new wine in old bottles” may be misleading and that researchers should seek to discover new concepts to catch the essence of new issues.

2 What are the pros and cons of the Cold War analogy?

Historical analogies are useful devices for the narrative of a theoretical framework when exploring the origin, process, and potential future of the US–China strategic competition. The most prominent examples of this are the Thucydides Trap and the Cold War analogy. As the most recent example, the Cold War analogy has earned significant attention and has contributed to the understanding of the dynamics of the US–China relationship. As a leading scholar in the usage of analogical reasoning in foreign policy analysis, Yuen Foong Khong (2019) argues that the Cold War analogy is the most persuasive historical analogy for better understanding the contemporary rivalry. The debates about the Cold War analogy focus on whether the US–Soviet and US–China competitions share the same core dimensions, as well as on the question of what the most fundamental attributes or dimensions of the two great power strategic competitions are. Different approaches produce different conclusions.

First, let us discuss the evidence in favor of the Cold War analogy. The Cold War analogy group can be divided into two different subgroups: (1) researchers in both international relations (IR) and diplomatic history and (2) the policymaker circles in China and the US. The first subgroup assumes that the US–Soviet and US–China strategic competitions share two or three key attributes or features, such as ideological or geopolitical competition and a strategic environment featuring nuclear deterrence. In his prominent piece, Khong (2019) argues that the power discrepancy between the US and China is shrinking in Asia, where the strategic competition between the two powers largely focuses on ideological and economic considerations. There are several other profound factors shared by the Cold War and the US–China strategic competition, including the nuclear deterrence and systematic decoupling between the two powers. This decoupling trend is exhibited by the Trump administration's first-term policy of decoupling from Chinese high technology, as well as by the US–China trade war and the public opinion battle about the COVID-19 pandemic. In sum, the Cold War analogy group assumes that the two great power strategic competitions share several existing and meaningful similarities.

Besides the argument advanced by leading scholars such as Khong, the Cold War analogy serves as the default understanding of the essence of the two countries' relationship when discussing the US–China strategic competition (Li 2020). Even Henry Kissinger (Bloomberg News 2019) expressed his concern that the US–China relationship might unintentionally slip into a cold war when he attended an international ceremony honoring US–China rapprochement and President Nixon in late 2019. Nowadays the Cold War analogy is the most accessible heuristic tool when researchers and policymakers explore the origins, mechanisms, and dangerous future of the deteriorating US–China relationship. The fact that the most recent case among great power strategic competitions is the Cold War, which ended only 30 years ago, explains the Cold War analogy's popularity among scholars, especially given the presence of cognitive availability bias (Jervis 1976). In addition, the fact that policymakers from both sides grew up in the heated Cold War environment contributes to the formation of Cold War strategic thinking, especially on the US side.

As for Chinese policymakers, Secretary of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi (2020) and other diplomatic leaders stress the dangerous consequences of the Cold War thinking of US decision-makers, especially President Trump and Secretary of State Pompeo. Chinese concerns about the tragic historical lessons of the Cold War inform their objections to Cold War thinking, as well as their appeals for cooperation with the US. Naturally, with the Cold War analogy as a negative metaphor for grasping the nature of the US–China strategic competition, both sides aim to avoid conflict-oriented traps, such as the Thucydides Trap.

Second, let us discuss objections to the Cold War analogy. Few voices publicly object to the assumption that the Cold War analogy is both prevalent and useful for exploring the hotly discussed US–China strategic competition during the Trump era. Melvyn P. Leffler (1992), an outstanding Cold War scholar, has published *A Preponderance of Power*, one of the most sophisticated pieces on the Cold War, in which he explores the origins of the Cold War and how the unintended consequences of strategic interactions contributed to its formation. Specifically, the Cold War was what the US made of it because decision-makers under the Truman administration overestimated the evil intentions of its counterpart. More recently, Leffler (2019a, b) has argued that the Cold War analogy is dangerous and has pointed out the differences between China and the former Soviet Union, including their defensive and offensive strategic operations, their positions on ideology and expansionism, and the US policies they faced (i.e., decoupling vs. containment). Leffler's serious objections to the Cold War analogy are valuable, as historical analogies should address the comparability of reality and history. In addition, the question of what the fundamental similarities between the US–Soviet and US–China strategic competitions are remains unresolved; unfortunately, consensus on this issue has not been yet achieved. The other way the Cold War analogy may cause dangerous outcomes, implicit in Leffler's objections, is through self-fulfilling prophecy caused by strategic thinking: one of the lessons of the Cold War is that Truman administration's pursuit of power preponderance contributed to the US's strategic thinking, misperceptions, and rivalry with regard to the Soviet Union, all of which tragically led to the unintended Cold War. In the current stage of the escalating US–China strategic competition, Leffler's caution against misusing the Cold War analogy is valuable.

The debate surrounding the Cold War analogy presents a further question: what are the fundamental similarities and differences between the Cold War and the ongoing US–China rivalry? The most important remaining issue is that while both the similarities and differences between the two strategic competitions are apparent, academics and policymakers have not yet reached agreement on the question of whether the Cold War analogy is an appropriate heuristic. Next, I will explore the potential misunderstanding caused by historical analogies from the perspective of cognitive and linguistic psychology.

3 Why are historical analogies always misleading?

As stated above, historical analogies are useful cognitive tools for analyzing new IR facts and presenting policy prescriptions, though they are always misleading for both researchers and decision-makers. While the essence of strategic competition is

unchangeable in the eyes of a realist, historical analogies may provide historical lessons, such as how the US learned about Chinese policy sensitivity through conflicts stemming from its underestimation of China's resolve to defend its national interests, such as the Korean War and the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis. Even with these potential benefits, the Cold War analogy is always misleading in the context of exploring the dynamics of and possible prospects for the US–China strategic competition during the Trump era due to the motivated and cognitive biases caused by framing effects.

With a sophisticated theoretical framework and detailed case studies about United States' decision-making during the Cold War, Khong (1992) demonstrates the usage of historical analogy in US foreign policy decision-making, especially during crises. The negative side of relying of historical analogy for decision-making is well established in the history of US foreign policy, and other leading political psychologists, such as Ernest May (1973) and Robert Jervis (1976) have demonstrated a more specific causal mechanism through which historical analogy may produce cognitive biases and faulty decisions. Next, I will discuss in more detail the issues caused by the misuse of the Cold War analogy when exploring the origins, escalation, and potential tragedy of the US–China strategic competition.

Motivated biases caused by the Cold War analogy. As Leffler (1992) argues in his masterpiece, *A Preponderance of Power*, the Cold War largely originated from an emotional clash in which the US was motivated by its fear that potential Soviet expansion would threaten US national security and American values. The Thucydides Trap originated from the Peloponnesian War, which was caused by Athens' accumulation of power and Sparta's insecurity (Thucydides 1972). The Cold War analogy shares the assumption that states are motivated by negative emotions, such as fear, that can cause foreseeable and inevitable security dilemmas.

In addition, the Cold War analogy supposes that the US–China strategic competition is undesirable other than the strategic cooperation of the two great powers. Although the cooperative signals sent by China are credible and would be beneficial to the avoiding conflict between the US and China, the strategic competition initiated by the two is inevitable (Yoder 2019). With its rapidly growing power in recent years, China is pursuing a more active foreign policy across the globe, which appears revisionist in the eyes of the US. The Chinese perspective on world order cannot be classified in binary terms such as “status quo” or “revisionist”, as China's strategic behavior follows a logic of resistance and status-seeking in which conflict is not inevitable (Schweller and Pu 2011; Larson 2020; Foot 2020). With regard to the logic of the Cold War, the US's and Soviet Union's strategic thinking, which shaped the strategic competition between the two sides, was not fixed, but instead changed over the course of bilateral interactions. The tragic downstream consequence of this was mistrust and missed opportunities for cooperation between the two powers (Larson 1997). In view of the above, analogies used by researchers reshape the assumptions underlying their descriptions and recommendations with regard to the US–China relationship. While the Cold War analogy heuristic has some benefits, as acknowledged earlier in this paper, it does not resolve the question of what core features or dimensions of the Cold War are shared by the US–China strategic competition. There is no consensus on this question because the default assumption of

the Cold War analogy is based on the ambiguous comparability of historical and contemporary cases.

The other potential motivated bias caused by the usage of the Cold War analogy is the analogy's systematic effect on the appeal of cooperation, which means that avoiding confrontation and conflict between the US and China may result in unintended conflict. Ironically, states can march towards conflict despite wishes to avoid conflict or achieve cooperation. The wishful thinking motivated by attempts to avoid another Cold War generates low-cost conversations, bargaining, and concessions that contribute to the underestimation of the strategic resolve of one side by the other (Fearon 1997; Morrow 1999). Put differently, from a rationalist perspective, the more effective way to attain peace is through high-cost signaling, and the desire to avoid another Cold War can result in offensive or defensive strategic behavior that triggers conflict.

Framing effects caused by the Cold War analogy. The selection of a theoretical framework to describe the dynamics of the US–China strategic competition has some downstream implications. More specifically, framing effects serve as a mechanism that determines the problem-solving thought process. As the leading cognitive linguist Lakoff (2014) puts it, framing effects are the determining factor for the outcome of US presidential campaigns. His famous idiom, “don’t think of an elephant”, demonstrates one such framing effect, as one cannot help but think of an elephant when told not to. Accordingly, the Cold War analogy serves as a cognitive metaphor and framework when exploring the dynamics of US–China strategic competition.

First, the Cold War analogy may frame the identity of the competitor. In the framework of Cold War rhetoric, the Soviet Union and the US define each other as rivals, even enemies. Though the Cold War strategic competition between the superpowers mainly focused on ideological and strategic contests, as well as global leadership, the identities framed by the two sides were well expressed in remarkable speeches given by Winston Churchill and Harry Truman. As for the bilateral relationship between the US and China during the Trump era, even though the US has defined China as one of its most threatening strategic rivals, China has preferred to send cooperative signals to the US. This has been the case for most of the trade war period, despite the fact that the US has paid more attention to China’s power accumulation and charm offensive diplomacy, which in turn has exacerbated its perception of China as a threat (Yin 2020).

Second, the Cold War analogy may frame the emotions each side holds with regard to the other. The US’s growing fear with regard to China’s global charm offensive diplomacy shows that the US is motivated by insecurity and its reactive emotions (Zhang 2019). The other source of the US’s fear comes from its strategic reflection, which means the US puts its national interests ahead of its international obligations due to its relative power decline. By contrast, the US’s counterpart, China, has pursued reform and opening-up policies since 1978 and still insists on the idea of contributing to the existing world order, showing no direct interest in replacing the leadership of the US. On an emotional level, the US and China are asymmetric in the sense that the US exhibits more fear than China due to its perceptions of China’s charm offensive diplomacy (The White House 2020). According to the emotional framework of the Cold War analogy, each side should distrust the

other and should prepare for the worst in preparation for coming conflict. Further, the future of the relationship between the two remains undetermined, as US policy preferences and strategic behavior with regard to China may shift after the 2020 US presidential election due to changes in domestic politics.

Third, the Cold War analogy may frame strategic choice. The Cold War analogy may suggest possible strategic actions for the US and China, including complete and systematic decoupling, establishing economic and military alliance systems, and competing for global leadership and ideological influence. Though there has been no direct conflict or war between the two great powers, strategic competition often takes the form of proxy wars and regional conflicts according to the Cold War analogy. This framing of strategic choice may bring a dark future to the US and China, though in reality, Trump is breaking down the US's own alliance system (Davis and Wei 2020) and China is still pursuing a policy of coexistence and conflict avoidance with regard to the US (Wang 2020; Yang 2020). It is still the early phase of the US–China strategic competition, which means the future relationship between the two powers will not necessarily take the shape of systematic confrontation, as in the Cold War, though Cold War strategic thinking may narrow the strategic options for both sides.

Cognitive biases caused by the Cold War analogy. With the framing effects described above, the Cold War analogy leads to cognitive bias among the researchers and decision-makers of both sides. This, in turn, contributes to the formation of security dilemmas, even escalation spirals leading to conflict, between the US and China. Specifically, such cognitive biases consist of two dimensions: selective attention and threat perception spiral effects.

First, let us discuss the selective attention effect. The framing of the Cold War analogy suggests that the US and China are power-seeking, rather than security-seeking, great powers that pursue global and regional preponderance. This power competition framework inspires researchers to assess US–China strategic interactions through the lens of power transition theory and offensive realism, but these theories do not capture the reality of the US–China strategic competition (Chan 2008, 2019; Mearsheimer 2010). As for their motivations, the US and China do not always seek to maximize power. For example, under the Trump administration, the US cares more about the rational calculation of its national interests than its obligations under international regimes, and it does not primarily lean on its traditional allies to “contain” the growing power and influence of China. China pursues its own global and regional roles to reshape the world order rather than replace the leadership of the US (Johnston 2019). The realist framing of the Cold War analogy elicits strategic thinking in line with more traditional power competition with regard to discerning the logic underlying the ongoing US–China strategic competition.

Second, let us discuss the misunderstanding caused by threat perception. One lesson from the origins of the Cold War is that each side overestimated the other's malicious intentions, which resulted in a missed opportunity for cooperation in the early stage of the prolonged conflict (Larson 1997). The Truman administration was dominated by mistrust, fear, and prejudice with regard to the Soviet Union, and bureaucratic competition among US government departments made confrontation the only option for resolving the unclear relationship between the

US and the Soviet Union (Leffler 1992). Thus, under the framework of the Cold War analogy, the strategic competition between the US and the Soviet Union was tragic and unavoidable, which indicates that the US–China strategic competition is a natural outcome of the threat perceptions, misperceptions, and emotions held by the two powers. But it is safe to contend that these threat perceptions are misperceived, as they are motivated by fear and are not the results of objective assessments by each side. Accordingly, the US–China strategic competition largely originates from the low credibility of the cooperative signals sent by China, and further conflict is avoidable according to the logic of status conflict and power transition theories (Larson and Shevchenko 2019; Yoder 2019; Wang 2019).

Possible independent variables omitted by the Cold War analogy. The Cold War originated from the power competition between the US and the Soviet Union, which in turn stemmed from each side's overestimation of the hostility and evil intentions of the other. This overestimation was caused by the emotional and ideological prejudice held by each great power. The Cold War analogy assumes that the US–China strategic competition observes the same logic as that of the Cold War strategic competition. Specifically, it assumes that the US–China strategic competition originates from power transition, ideological contestation across the globe, and systematic decoupling between the two powers (Friedberg and Boustany Jr. 2020; Wyne 2020). It follows that the Cold War analogy predicts a pessimistic future for the strategic competition between the US and China on the basis of its own robust theoretical foundation and rigorous historical case evidence. But this rigorous theoretical logic may be misleading if applied to the US–China case.

Besides the fact that it can direct decision-makers and researchers to learn broad lessons from history, the Cold War analogy may lead one to make the methodological error of ignoring the real independent variable behind the US–China strategic competition and conflict escalation in favor of false causal relationships. Exploring the causal mechanisms behind the dynamics of the US–China strategic competition is very complicated, and domestic politics can exert a causal effect on the US–China conflict through security dilemma and trust breakdown mechanisms. From the perspective of strategic interaction, the essence of the US–China strategic competition features the reversed motivations of the two powers. Put differently, while China makes great efforts to avoid having a strategically competitive relationship with the US, its efforts consolidate the US's perception that it is hiding and misrepresenting its capabilities, resolve, and other private information and engaging in deceptive tactics to buy time. The COVID-19 pandemic illustrates how the US's offensive strategic mentality and condemnation of China escalates the conflict between the two powers; it clearly reveals the political logic of appealing to domestic audiences and dodging or redirecting blame. This case demonstrates that reality does not replicate history, which means that the Cold War analogy may lead to flawed speculation regarding the dynamics of current US–China conflicts. As for the question of which among the power transition variable and Trump's particular leadership style has greater causal significance, the Cold War analogy provides no answers. I contend that the theoretical frameworks of the Cold War analogy and other historical analogies, as well as other mainstream IR theories, engender the embarrassing

phenomena of “cutting the feet to fit the shoes” when addressing new cases of strategic competition.

4 Towards a new definition for US–China strategic competition

The question of how to grasp the essence of the US–China strategic competition is addressed by many theoretical approaches across diverse issue areas. Among these approaches, historical analogies are relatively persuasive with regard to understanding the nature of the ongoing competition. I have argued above in detail that the Cold War analogy can be misleading in many regards. The next questions to be explored are (1) how should we deal with new cases of strategic competition, and (2) what methodological pitfalls should we be wary of?

First, the question of the plausibility of using the Cold War analogy to compare the US–China and US–Soviet strategic competitions remains unresolved. Leading historians have explored some of the fundamental dimensions or features of the US–Soviet Cold War competition, particularly systematic competition or even confrontation in geopolitics, economics, and strategic offensive operations, as well as full-scale ideological competition. But consensus over the similarities between the US–China and the US–Soviet strategic competitions is far from being reached. Most pieces on this topic stress common or similar dimensions between the strategic competitions or the distinct attributes of the US–China case, ranging from power structure to the motivations or intentions of the rivals. My judgment with regard to using the Cold War analogy to compare the two strategic competition cases is that there will never be a convincing answer to the question of whether the two cases of strategic competition share the same dynamics or logic, as the question is qualitative and lacks clear criteria. Specifically, the Cold War can be defined as a full-scale strategic confrontation without war, while the US–China strategic relationship can be defined as being in the limited early stages of strategic competition. The definitions for the essence and structure of the two cases of strategic competition are quite different, though several leading scholars and politicians have given warnings about the dangerous future of the US–China relationship if the two countries are unable to co-manage their conflicts and relationship. The differences between the two cases—including differences in the motivation, ideology, and identity dimensions of strategic competition—that have been identified by leading scholars are real, but do not capture the essence of the strategic relationships of the two cases. This means that focusing on differences or similarities in terms of actors, actions, and issues, but not in terms of the structure of a particular strategic competition, can lead to misunderstandings with regard to the essence of that strategic competition.

Second, we should use value-free theoretical concepts to avoid the value-laden pitfall. Surely, no observation or speculation is entirely free of theoretical or ideological preferences, but this does not mean that popular existing conceptual and theoretical frameworks are unnecessary or useless. Here, with regard to grasping the essence of the US–China strategic competition, the Cold War analogy is necessary but not sufficient. Moreover, it is not superior to many other theories, from realism to constructivism and from psychological bias to power transition approaches, with

regard to understanding the dynamics of the US–China strategic competition (Chan 2019; Schweller 2018). Put differently, historical analogy may be useful for capturing the basic dimensions of contemporary cases. Still, it presents the significant risk of producing flawed theoretical or empirical outcomes because the Cold War was mainly featured by ideology and political emotions, which is relatively value-laden compared to the more neutral concept, such as strategic competition. Selecting and utilizing more abstract concepts, such as the general strategic competition (with regard to both historical and current cases), rather than the Cold War analogy or the different kinds of “traps” that are popular in academia is a better option (Brands 2019).

Third, we should be wary of the misuse of the “adjective plus” or “updated” versions of the Cold War. As an ancient and international phenomenon, strategic competition between great powers continues to shape the evolution of the present world order. The usual way for most scholars to deal with a new case is to develop “adjective plus old case” concepts, such as the “New Cold War”, “quasi-Cold War”, or variations of “Cold War 1.0” and “2.0”. This type of conceptual configuration is relatively useful for understanding the basic features of new and ongoing strategic competitions between great powers, such as the present US–China competition, but it faces methodological problems and the issue of conceptual stretching (Satori 1970). Taking into consideration the popularity of the democracy concept in comparative politics, “adjective plus democracy” concepts often fail to capture or recognize differences among diverse democratic states across the world; “adjective plus Cold War” models have similar shortcomings.

Fourth, we should return to more abstract conceptualization: we should recognize the US–China strategic competition as a phenomenon and paradigm, and thus use more abstract definitions to describe its type and causal mechanisms. In the framework of strategic competition, the US–China case differs from past cases, including the Cold War case, in many regards, such as power structure, economic and military systems, strategic intentions and behavior, and ideological competition. The US gradually earned and consolidated its hegemony during the Cold War, but now is fighting against relative decline in its soft power and hard power. China is pursuing a non-confrontational policy with regard to the US, likely as a status quo state or soft resister. Despite Trump and the trends of populism and nationalism he embodies, the US’s radical economic decoupling from China can only be partial due to the interdependent nature of globalization (Friedberg and Boustany 2020). The Cold War strategic competition can be useful as a recent case in a comparative framework, but not as an analogical heuristic. In the case of the latter, it can lead to misunderstanding of the US–China case.

In short, the US–China strategic competition originates from structural misperceptions and domestic political dynamics and is not the inevitable consequence of changes in international power structure. A general strategic competition may be a suitable concept to describe the US–China case as a phenomenon and paradigm. The Cold War is characterized by full-scale confrontation without war, while the US–China strategic relationship is still in the early stages of a long-term strategic competition. However, the future of the US–China relationship appears to be very pessimistic, especially under the Trump administration. On the basis of

the fundamental differences between the essence of the Cold War and that of the US–China strategic relationship, a theory of general strategic competition, supported by evidence from the US–China case, ought to be enough to understand the dynamics of the US–China strategic competition. While the Cold War historical analogy is helpful, it cannot serve as a framework for understanding the logic of the ongoing case. Specifically, in the general strategic competition paradigm, the semi-decoupling strategy of the US indicates that, unlike in the case of the Cold War, the two powers have not slipped into full-scale confrontation. Whereas the US is isolating itself from its own alliance system, China is taking great effort to avoid direct strategic competition and confrontation. As we ascend the ladder of abstraction and analyze the essence of US–China relationship case via the general strategic competition theory that can help us avoid being trapped in the misunderstanding caused by the Cold War analogy, we might also face the risk of missing the particular feature of the ongoing case. One reason for such a possibility of missing is that the US–China strategic competition is still on its way of evolution and undetermined by the domestic politics of both, which means its particular feature is ambiguous and changeable. Aside from the Cold War analogy and its pitfalls, the conceptualization of a “new Cold War” or “Cold War 2.0” can only describe the US–China case as a phenomenon and not as a paradigm. The recent case needs new conceptual innovation to underpin new theory; historical analogy cannot solve this new puzzle.

5 Conclusion

The future of the world order will be determined, to some degree, by the US–China strategic competition. With the dramatic escalation of the bilateral conflict during the Trump era, scholars have made great efforts and employed different theoretical approaches to understand the basic political dynamics of this fundamental change in the relationship between the two great powers (Medeiros 2019). The Cold War analogy is the most frequently referred to theoretical heuristic and has contributed to a better understanding of the essence of the US–China strategic competition. The rapid development of the COVID-19 pandemic and confrontations between pro- and anti-globalization forces have altered the strategic environment of the great power competition. As an increasingly important international actor, China is shaping global and regional orders through its “charm offensive” diplomacy in ways that cause the US to be wary, through mechanisms such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS summits and mechanisms, and public diplomacy through Confucius Institutes. These new dynamics pose challenges to the ability of the former theoretical frameworks, such as those of mainstream IR theories and the Cold War analogy, to explain the essence of the US–China case, especially in the post-pandemic world.

Although the Cold War analogy is popular and useful for grasping features of the US–China case, scholars should be cautious with regard to its misleading effects. Just as historical learning always causes foreign policy decision-making fiascos, the Cold War analogy, with its inherent pitfalls, can easily lead to poor, biased, or negative outcomes. The conceptual stretching problem in comparative politics originates

from the rapid state building that took place after World War II; we should bear this and similar methodological concerns in mind while studying the US–China case of great power strategic competition. Put simply, the typology of great power strategic competition should not be arranged according to the Cold War analogy, but instead should focus on origins, dynamics, logic, causal relationships, and dimensions within the framework of strategic competition. Retreating to the more abstract concept of great power competition is a useful way to avoid the conceptual stretching pitfall. The US–China case is better suited to the framework of general strategic competition due to differences between its essence and that of the Cold War case.

Funding The Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities, and the Research Funds of Renmin University of China, Grant no. 18CNI001.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The author declares that there are no conflict of interests.

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