

What's so Great Power about International Competition?

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Five years ago, few policy analysts — and fewer international-relations scholars — spoke of “great-power competition.” But by 2019, as one journalist put it, “great-power competition” was being “invoked from Aspen to Israel to South Korea, and by U.S. officials making the case for all sorts of policies.” Its ubiquity is even more remarkable given that no one seems to know what the term means.

Debates about “great-power competition” tend to pivot on the nature of “competition.” Instead, this roundtable focuses on the “great power” part of the equation. Participants closely examine — and generally challenge — three common assumptions of the “GPC” literature: First, that states are “great powers” to the extent that they possess certain attributes, such as power-projection capability, significant instruments of economic power, or international recognition. Second, that middle-tier and weaker powers play a secondary role in a “competitive” international system. Third, that “great powers,” however we define them, display distinct behavioral patterns from other states.

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