OCTOBER 2024

Defining Success

Does the United States Need an "End State" for Its China Policy?

EDITORS

Jude Blanchette

Lily McElwee

A Report of the CSIS Freeman Chair in China Studies

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Introduction: The United States' China Policy in Historical Context

By Jude Blanchette

Freeman Chair in China Studies, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)

The ongoing debate within the United States over whether to pursue a clear "end state" in its China policy or focus on managing the competition reflects a crucial divide in American strategic thinking. As tensions with China deepen, U.S. policymakers and experts are wrestling with the question of how best to navigate this evolving rivalry. One camp argues that the United States must articulate definitive long-term goals to safeguard U.S. interests and shape the future global order. The opposing view contends that given the inherent uncertainties of China's political trajectory and the volatility of global events, it may be wiser for the United States to adopt a more flexible approach, one that emphasizes managing the competition rather than locking in a fixed endpoint. This debate strikes at the heart of how the United States should engage its most formidable challenger in the twenty-first century.

This report brings together more than 20 leading scholars from the United States and its allies and partners to examine this debate, analyzing both the strategic necessity and the historical context of the U.S.-China rivalry. Understanding today's debate requires a longer view—one that places contemporary issues within the broader sweep of history. The United States and China have been grappling with each other for over 150 years, navigating a relationship that has been characterized by both cooperation and intense competition. It is against this historical backdrop that the current tensions must be understood, and it is in this context that the necessity of a clear "end state" or the prudence of ongoing management must be evaluated.

The history of U.S.-China relations stretches back to the mid-nineteenth century, beginning with the Treaty of Wanghia in 1844. This treaty, signed following the Opium Wars, marked the first formal diplomatic agreement between the United States and China. While it opened trade and established American rights in Chinese ports, it also reflected the unequal power dynamics of the time, as China was forced into concessions by Western powers. The treaty laid the foundation for a relationship rooted in commercial interests but shaped by geopolitical rivalry and strategic distrust.

The late nineteenth century saw the United States play a unique role in China through initiatives such as the Open Door Policy, which sought to guarantee U.S. access to the Chinese market and to prevent European powers from carving up China into spheres of influence. American leaders argued that all nations should have equal access to Chinese markets, not only as a matter of economic interest but as a principle of fairness. Yet, despite this seemingly benign policy, the United States was still driven by its own strategic goals, attempting to secure influence in China without resorting to colonialism.

This early period of interaction demonstrates a key feature of U.S.-China relations that persists today: a tension between cooperation and competition, between engagement and self-interest. Even as the United States worked to protect China from European colonialism, it was also seeking to assert its own influence. This duality has been a recurring theme in U.S.-China relations, from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which reflected rising racial and economic anxieties, to the 1940s, when China became a crucial ally in the fight against Imperial Japan during World War II. As both nations evolved, so too did the stakes of their engagement.

Fast-forward to the Cold War, and the competition between the United States and China took on new dimensions. Following the communist revolution in 1949, China became a central player in the global ideological struggle between capitalism and communism. America's containment strategy, largely focused on the Soviet Union, extended to China, particularly after the Korean War. But despite decades of isolation and hostility, both countries eventually found common ground when President Richard Nixon opened the door to U.S.-China engagement in 1972, seeing China as a counterbalance to Soviet power.

This period of rapprochement, however, did not resolve the underlying strategic tensions. Rather, it temporarily aligned the two powers' interests in the face of a common adversary. Once the Cold War ended, the United States embraced a strategy of engagement, hoping that China's integration into the global economy would lead to a "mellowing" of Chinese behavior and its evolution into a stakeholder in the international order. For a time, this strategy appeared to be working, as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) released its grasp on the economy, providing space for millions of Chinese citizens to work their way out of poverty. At the same time, China's political institutions began to evolve out of their Soviet-Maoist straightjacket. Yet, by the early twenty-first century, it became clear that China's leadership was growing wary of Western economic and political models.

Instead, they pursued a strategy of authoritarian resilience, pairing economic growth with military power and political control under the CCP, particularly under the leadership of Xi Jinping.

Today, the United States faces a China that is more powerful, more confident, and more assertive on the world stage. Whether through economic statecraft, military modernization, or technological innovation, China seeks to reshape the global order in ways that challenge U.S. dominance.
The strategic competition is no longer confined to military or economic realms; it extends into cyberspace, technological innovation, and even the narratives that shape global governance. As U.S. policymakers debate whether to define a clear “end state” or simply manage this competition, they must do so with a keen understanding of this historical trajectory.

Nearly all of this report’s contributors see economic, technological, and military friction as a likely enduring feature of the U.S.-China relationship, at least until change in China’s political trajectory opens up space for a different type of relationship. This near-consensus among the contributors, one that I share, is a tragedy for the respective populations of the United States, China, and, indeed, the entire world. Instead of these two great nations pooling their considerable economic resources and human talent to jointly address the world’s many growing challenges, they lock horns in a multifaceted strategic competition. The blunt reality is that because of these deep divisions, there will be diseases that will not be cured, there will be children who will unnecessarily suffer, and our climate will continue to degrade as opportunities for global cooperation slip through humanity’s fingers. The mutual mistrust and strategic rivalry between the United States and China create barriers to innovation, collaboration, and the bold, unified action needed to tackle existential threats. In this fractured global landscape, the pursuit of dominance and security overshadows the shared responsibility to steward a livable future for all, leaving the world worse off.

How Does This End? The Future of the U.S.-China Competition

By Hal Brands

Henry A. Kissinger Distinguished Professor, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies; Senior Fellow, American Enterprise Institute

The U.S.-China competition has begun, but how will it end? There is a bipartisan consensus that Sino-American relations will be defined primarily by rivalry across multiple regions and dimensions of statecraft for years to come. Yet there is little clarity on what will happen after that. Washington has accepted, under both Donald Trump and Joe Biden, the reality of competition without identifying a theory of victory—which means that U.S. leaders have yet to articulate how rivalry will lead to something other than unremitting tension and danger.[1]

This marks a contrast to the United States' Cold War experience. By 1947, U.S. officials—principally George Kennan—argued that if Washington held the line against Soviet expansion, while selectively exerting counterpressure, the Soviet system would either eventually collapse from its own internal weaknesses or evolve into something less threatening. It took time for this thesis to gain widespread acceptance; in the early 1950s, the Eisenhower administration considered preventive war and aggressive rollback as alternative solutions to the Soviet challenge. But over time, Kennan's theory of victory directed the United States' approach.[2]

There are many conceivable outcomes to the present Sino-American competition, ranging from the United States ceding a sphere of influence to China, to mutual accommodation, to Chinese collapse, and even to a devastating global conflict. Yet if the goal of competition is to secure a better peace by means short of war, then the pivotal question becomes whether the United States can achieve this outcome by changing the minds of present or future Chinese leaders—convincing them that expansion and aggrandizement is futile—or whether it will require the decline of Chinese power or the downfall of the Communist Party. In short, can Sino-American tensions turn into competitive coexistence, as some Biden administration officials have suggested? Or must this clash culminate in regime failure, via the weakening or political evolution of the United States' challenger? U.S. officials should certainly hope for the first outcome. They should probably prepare for the second.

The New Consensus

Over the past decade, a consensus has emerged in Washington: the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is seeking to regain China's historic place as the dominant power in Asia (and perhaps globally) and is pursuing a comprehensive strategy—economic, technological, diplomatic, and military—to attain this end. Beijing is seeking to upend, perhaps forcibly, the favorable balance of power that the United States has long enjoyed in the Western Pacific while challenging U.S. technological, economic, and diplomatic leadership globally. As a result, the Trump and Biden administrations have largely abandoned the idea of using engagement and inducement to integrate China into—and make it a stakeholder in—the liberal international order and have focused on penalizing Beijing's revisionist behavior instead.

Yet this consensus is more superficial than it initially seems. There remain major debates about the degree to which China is an ideological rival, whether China is a peaking power whose economic strength will soon begin (in relative terms) to decline, when and under what circumstances Xi Jinping might be willing to use military force, and how thorough an economic decoupling or de-risking the United States should seek. Furthermore, the U.S. government has yet to clearly and consistently articulate its view of how competition will produce a better and more stable status quo.

At several points—namely in a speech by then Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in July 2020 and in documents issued by the National Security Council and the Department of State's Policy Planning Staff that same year—the Trump administration argued that competition with China was caused by the nature of the Communist Party.[3] This assertion implied that the rivalry would last as long as the regime itself. Yet the administration also insisted, on various occasions, that its approach was "not premised on determining a particular end state for China" or "on an attempt to change the PRC's domestic governance model."[4]

In its early months, the Biden administration adopted the overall framework of strategic competition with China—"extreme competition," as the president initially phrased it, before tempering that description by terming the relationship as one of "healthy competition" instead—without fully clarifying its view of how that competition might ultimately be resolved. There are two basic possibilities: competitive coexistence or regime failure.

Competitive Coexistence

Advocates of competitive coexistence believe the United States can eventually change the minds of Chinese leaders—if not Xi then perhaps those who come after him—convincing them not to forcibly contest the balance of power in Asia and upset the liberal international order in that region and beyond. The idea is that if Washington shows, over some sustained period, that it can preserve a favorable military balance in the Western Pacific, preserve its economic and technological advantages, and rally overlapping coalitions of states to push back against Chinese coercion, then Beijing might conclude that its current course is self-defeating and adopt a less bellicose stance.

This would not lead to perfect harmony. U.S.-China relations would still have strong elements of military, geopolitical, economic, technological, and diplomatic competition. But Beijing would presumably pull back a bit on issues—such as Taiwan and the U.S. alliance structure in East Asia—where U.S. vital interests are at stake. The end state, whether enshrined in a formal diplomatic settlement or simply arrived at through tacit geopolitical bargaining, would be a more stable relationship in which the danger of war recedes, the United States' key strategic interests are preserved, and areas of potential cooperation can gradually expand.[5]

Competitive coexistence updates, but does not discard, the logic of U.S. policy toward China in the post-Cold War era. It holds that Washington can still shape Chinese behavior through the proper mix of incentives, although the United States will rely significantly more on pressure and dissuasion, meant to inhibit China from doing disruptive things, and far less on positive inducements aimed at making it a responsible stakeholder. Competitive coexistence rests on the idea that the CCP may mellow over time; even if Xi Jinping has chosen confrontation, perhaps his successors will take a more moderate tack. Indeed, the more effectively the United States pushes back against disruptive Chinese behavior *during* Xi's rule—that is, the more it shows that Chinese coercion and aggression will lead to counterpressure and isolation—the more likely it is that a future generation of Chinese leaders will conclude it is in their interest to de-escalate the rivalry with the United States.

This approach is appealing because it offers strategic success without requiring the downfall of one of the competitors. Yet it also invites a series of questions that proponents of competitive coexistence have yet to persuasively answer.

For example: Does the fact that Beijing has become so assertive, not just regionally but globally, over the past 15 years indicate that any significant softening of China's policies may be many years in the future? Indeed, if Xi retains power as long as Mao did—until the age of 82—then a post-Xi leadership would not emerge until 2036. (If he lives as long as Deng Xiaoping did—until the age of 92—a leadership transition would not occur for another generation.) In addition, how could U.S. officials be sure whether the CCP made a strategic decision for moderation or as a tactical decision meant to temporarily reduce tensions in hopes of splitting its opponents or inducing the United States to lower its guard?[6] After all, this is often what Soviet leaders had in mind when they spoke of "peaceful coexistence" in the 1950s. When U.S. officials declined to accept a détente on Soviet terms, a terrifying period of high tensions followed.[7]

The biggest problem with competitive coexistence is that it does not seem to reflect the reality of U.S.-China relations. This approach holds that the rivalry between the United States and China is severe but not immutable. In other words, a powerful CCP-led China can eventually be reconciled to a world order in which the United States, its allies and partners, and its democratic values remain predominant. Yet what if that belief is illusory because the rivalry is more deeply rooted, more fundamental? What if the CCP desires a more thorough revision of the international order because it views a liberal system led by a democratic superpower as an existential threat to its own survival?

There is substantial evidence to suggest that this is the case. Sino-American tensions may have risen under Xi Jinping, but Rush Doshi has shown that those tensions reflect something far more profound than the soaring ambitions of a single statesman.[8] Leading Chinese officials have publicly affirmed the party's view that the United States has *always* been committed to undermining, even overthrowing, the Communist regime. "From the Chinese perspective," former diplomat Fu Ying wrote in 2020, "the U.S. has never given up its intent to overthrow the socialist system led by the Communist Party of China."[9] Even at the height of Sino-American cooperation during the 1980s, Deng alleged that Washington was prosecuting a "smokeless World War III" against the CCP.[10] Sinologist Nadège Rolland argues that the party cannot reconcile itself to an international order whose liberal principles conflict directly with the government's illiberal rule.[11] Even in the early 1990s, when the United States was betting big on engagement with China, some Chinese military officials argued that it was "impossible to fundamentally improve Sino-U.S. relations."[12] Xi himself has more recently suggested that the United States is bent on the "containment" and "suppression" of his country.

"Win-win" rhetoric aside, the CCP is governed by a fundamentally zero-sum mindset which bodes ill for long-term strategic accommodation.[13] Moreover, the party's increasingly coercive behavior vis-à-vis Taiwan and other Asian democracies, its horrifying crimes against its Uyghur population, and its utterly cynical and irresponsible conduct at the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrate how fundamentally the regime's concept of self-interest diverges from anything acceptable to the United States and other liberal democracies. Today, far from preparing for détente, Xi's government is hoarding food and fuel, churning out weapons, and making moves that suggest it may be preparing for war.[14] In view of all this, the United States needs to reckon with the possibility that acute Sino-American antagonism will persist so long as a powerful China is governed by the CCP.

Regime Failure

If this is the case, then even a long period of vigorous competition by the United States would not bring about a mellowing of the CCP. Instead, the rivalry could persist in a fairly intense form until the party loses its ability to prosecute that rivalry. This could happen due to either a decline in Chinese power or a fundamental change in the nature of the ruling regime. In this scenario, competition would not be a relatively short bridge to a more stable relationship, but rather a longer bridge to the collapse of China's power or the transformation of its government.

According to this theory, what will end the Sino-American competition is the accumulated effects of the profound internal problems China confronts, combined with consistent external resistance.

If the United States and its friends can check China's aggrandizement, then the combination of slowing growth, a slow-motion demographic catastrophe, an increasingly stifling and unresponsive political system, and other internal flaws could eventually produce a marked decline in China's ability to challenge the international order. Beijing's hostility to the United States could become less strategically problematic, even if hostility persists.

Alternatively, the same pressures could eventually cause an evolution in Chinese governance, either toward democracy or simply toward a less toxic form of tyranny. In either case, the United States' task would be to hold the line geopolitically—while perhaps marginally increasing the stresses on Chinese power and governance—until these internal processes play out.

These are grim scenarios because the regime-failure scenario echoes an experience—the Cold War—that no sober analyst wishes to relive. The regime-failure theory also raises serious questions. A CCP that fears its power or control is slipping could become more aggressive, in hopes of locking in gains while it still can. If the United States uses offensive measures to increase the strains on Chinese power or on the Chinese regime—such as technological denial policies meant to keep Beijing well behind in the economic and military race—it could ratchet up tensions and dangers in the relationship. And critically, the United States simply does not know, at this point, whether the combination of external resistance and pressure would accelerate the decay of the CCP—or help it hang on by stoking Chinese nationalism.

That said, this approach is not as radical as it might initially sound. It need not involve actively seeking regime change any more than the United States' containment strategy actively sought to overthrow the rulers of the Kremlin. Back then, "regime failure" or "regime mellowing" was more of a long-term aspiration than a near-term operational objective. This approach also does not require abandoning diplomacy any more than containment precluded cooperation on arms control, nuclear non-proliferation, or global public health during the Cold War. What it requires, simply, is accepting that the nature of the CCP imposes severe limitations on how much the relationship can improve, so long as the party retains power.

Who Cares?

There is, of course, another question: Why should U.S. officials spend their time speculating about long-term theories of victory in a competition that is just getting underway? Indeed, given how dangerous that competition can be on a day-to-day basis, there is a certain argument for simply focusing on handling China in the here and now, while deferring intellectual debates about the distant future. This is, in fact, the approach that some key U.S. officials seem to favor.

But this would be a mistake. Strategy involves determining how actions taken today will lead to the achievement of distant objectives. Different theories of victory might produce different conceptions of what roles bilateral diplomacy and offensive pressure should play in U.S. statecraft. Moreover, if the United States does not know where it is going, how can Americans tell if it is getting anywhere? And if rivalry with China is indeed the fundamental challenge for U.S. strategy, does the U.S. government not owe the American people an answer to the question of where this all may lead?

Admittedly, it is hard to conclusively say which theory of victory is analytically dominant, because both theories hinge on judgments that are necessarily prospective and somewhat tentative. But in my view, the balance of evidence supports the more pessimistic theory—that competition will ultimately be resolved through changes in Chinese power or in the way China is governed. That is a dark view of where Sino-American competition is headed. Yet if the rivalry is as fundamental as CCP leaders seem to think, and as Xi himself sometimes says, then that view may also be the most realistic.

Yet this conclusion leads to a final problem. Right now, the theory of victory that holds together analytically may not be the theory of victory that best holds the counter-China coalition together. A multilateral strategy is necessary to check Chinese power. As the United States has seen in recent years, this requires assembling multiple, overlapping coalitions to balance Beijing militarily, economically, technologically, and ideologically.

The Biden team, in my view, has done fairly well in this task. But there is no denying that the rallying of these coalitions is often complicated by the fact that many U.S. allies and partners, in Asia, Europe, and elsewhere, have little appetite for a zero-sum slugfest between Washington and Beijing. Few of these countries—even the United States' closest allies—would welcome a U.S. strategy that explicitly seeks regime failure. Indeed, just talking about such a strategy in public makes many U.S. allies nervous. So, it is understandable that there has remained so much ambiguity in Washington's assessments of where the rivalry is going, because the truth may be something that no one particularly wants to hear.

There is no easy escape from this dilemma. Eventually, the U.S. government must be candid about its China strategy. There is no way to rally the domestic commitment and resources necessary to succeed if U.S. officials are not honest about the underlying problem. Democracies cannot have one strategic agenda in private and a second one for public and international consumption. In the near term, there may be good reasons to highlight the practical aspects of building the coalitions needed to counter China while downplaying the more sensitive question of how this might all end. But over the longer term, it is hard to see how the United States can win the defining rivalry of this century without being clear about what it is trying to achieve.

The Necessity of a Phased China Strategy

By Zack Cooper

Senior Fellow, American Enterprise Institute

The United States needs a China strategy that maintains security in the short term and presents a vision of success in the long term. Recent U.S. approaches have focused on either the former or the latter, without a clear strategy for integrating them together. This essay suggests a different framework–a phased strategy that overlays objectives with distinct timeframes. A phased approach of this sort is the only option around which policymakers can build a lasting and bipartisan consensus.[15]

Extreme End States

The wide range of views on China within the United States makes characterizing the overall debate difficult. Yet the extreme positions on the United States' China strategy are relatively clear: coevolution or regime change.[16] Neither is likely to attract sufficient support, for reasons explained below.

For many years, a cadre of U.S. experts promoted a strategy aimed at making China more like the United States and bringing it more fully into the international order. The end state envisioned by advocates of this approach was to make China a "responsible stakeholder" in the existing order rather than a threat to that system.[17] Henry Kissinger labeled this "co-evolution" and explained it as an effort in which "both countries pursue their domestic imperatives, cooperating where possible, and adjust their relations to minimize conflict. Neither side endorses all the aims of the other or presumes a total identity of interests, but both sides seek to identify and develop complementary interests."[18] This approach enjoyed broad bipartisan support for several decades.

Yet, over the last 15 years—and especially since Xi Jinping took over as general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2012—it became clear that China was not converging with the United States. As a result, Beijing is unlikely to become a responsible stakeholder in the existing system anytime soon, if at all. Xi has sketched out a vision of China as a challenger to the United States, rather than a partner. Although Beijing's vision of an alternative order has not come into focus—at least not yet—Chinese leaders proposed elements of an alternative system in the 20th Party Congress in 2022, as well as through the Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and Global Civilization Initiative.[19]

As it has become increasingly clear that China will not follow the path that some in the United States have hoped, experts from both parties have suggested that Washington should take a different approach to Beijing. Some have called for the "end of engagement," while others have called for an era of "strategic competition."[20] Few observers, however, have laid out a clear alternative end state to U.S-China coevolution.

A small group of academics and China experts favor a turn toward a policy of accommodation in order to ensure that China's rise does not lead to conflict. Charlie Glaser, for example, has suggested that an alteration of U.S. policy on Taiwan might be sufficient to satisfy Beijing.[21] Others have urged the United States and its allies and partners to give China more breathing room in the Western Pacific, which could help "meet China halfway."[22] This, however, appears unlikely to succeed given that Obama-era engagement efforts largely came to naught. Perhaps more importantly, there is little political support for these efforts in Washington today.

The alternative end state favored in some more hawkish circles is to actively undermine the CCP and accelerate processes that could bring down the regime.[23] But it remains unclear whether the United States has enough influence within China to genuinely threaten the CCP's hold on power. More importantly, even if this was possible, doing so might not be in the United States' interest, given the possibility that U.S.-instigated regime change could backfire and lead to even more confrontation. Moreover, it remains unclear whether a post-CCP government in China would be more cooperative with the United States.

So, although there are some who would advocate for end states of either coevolution or regime change, the bulk of observers in Washington find these alternatives unappealing and desire a third way. This is precisely what the Biden administration has attempted to offer.

Unsatisfying Steady States

Recognizing that neither of these end states has robust political support in the United States, the Biden administration and many Democrats have jettisoned discussion of end states altogether. Instead, they have embraced an approach focused on establishing a stable "steady state" with China. Shortly before returning to government, current deputy secretary of state Kurt Campbell advocated turning "from end states to steady states across military, economic, political, and global governance domains to find a form of evolving and complex co-existence."[24]

The Biden team has asserted that the best way to shape regional dynamics is by deepening Asian alliances and partnerships–its strategy therefore has revolved less around China's future than around that of the United States and its friends. The thinking is that Washington has less ability to influence Beijing's actions than commonly perceived, so U.S. policymakers should focus on things they can control. With this in mind, the Biden team put forward a three-part China strategy, which it calls "invest, align, compete."[25] The core idea is that investing in the United States and aligning with allies and partners will put the United States in a better position to compete with China.

But the lack of a clear objective with regard to the preferred end state of their China policy has been a recurring problem for advocates of the Biden administration's approach. Although it is tempting to do away with end states altogether, it is hard to convince the U.S. public to make great sacrifices for a competition with no end. Though Republicans have started making this critique more directly in recent months, political leaders from both sides of the aisle talk explicitly about winning, not just competing.

This is true even of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. In the foreword to his administration's National Security Strategy, Biden pledged to "win the competition for the 21st century."[26] In his last State of the Union speech, Biden was more explicit, promising to "win the competition for the 21st century against China."[27] Vice President Kamala Harris has made similar remarks, committing in her Democratic National Convention speech that "America, not China, wins the competition."[28] These remarks suggest that political leaders in the United States believe that the U.S. public wants to "win" rather than simply "compete," regardless of what their advisers put in policymaking documents.

The question that remains is whether the United States can identify an end state with regard to China that can win broad political support. Many Republicans are more willing to tolerate short-term instability if it puts the United States on a better long-term pathway vis-à-vis China. This case was made by then secretary of state Mike Pompeo when he referenced Richard Nixon in arguing, "we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside of the family of nations. . . . The world cannot be safe until China changes. Thus, our aim–to the extent we can, we must influence events. Our goal should be to induce change."[29]

This view has generally been an outlier among Republican policymakers. Although politicians may talk openly about accelerating the downfall of the CCP, few leaders embrace those statements when put into positions of power. Donald Trump's White House guidance on China strategy was explicit that "United States policies are not premised on an attempt to change the PRC's domestic governance model."[30] Other Trump administration officials have continued to insist that the

United States should signal to China that U.S. policy is to maintain the status quo when it comes to the CCP.[31]

Observers are thus left with three basic options—coevolution, regime change, or sustained competition—none of which alone can win sufficient support across the political spectrum to be sustainable from one administration to the next. The end states of coevolution and regime change are too extreme to attract bipartisan support. Steady-state competition is more palatable, but Republicans find it unsatisfying and even Democratic political leaders say their aim is to win, not just compete. The U.S. strategic community must do better than these three options—and it can.

A Phased Approach

Thankfully, there is a way to combine elements of all three concepts into a coherent strategy—it just requires a phased approach. Phasing would differentiate between short- and long-term objectives, acknowledging that the situation which exists today will not last forever and, therefore, could make more appealing end states possible at a later time.

In the short term, the United States is unlikely to fundamentally alter China's basic path. U.S. policies can certainly influence China's decisions on the margins. But at the moment, the best Washington can do is to build strength at home and partnerships abroad in order to demonstrate to Xi that he cannot overturn the existing order through the use or threat of force. In other words, U.S. policies designed to put the United States on a stronger competitive footing should win broad partisan support for the moment. This short-term period is likely to last at least as long as Xi remains in power—possibly the next 10–20 years. Both patience and firmness will be required during this period to avoid a conflict while demonstrating to China that aggression will not pay.[32]

Yet, in the long term, it is only natural for the U.S. public to expect that a strategy requiring substantial resource expenditures will bring about a more lasting resolution. Xi Jinping's eventual departure as general secretary could create an opportunity to reset the U.S.-China relationship. Optimists will no doubt hold out hope for a new set of leaders in China more open to genuine cooperation with the United States. Pessimists will think this unlikely and instead envision the people of China demanding political reforms from within once Xi is gone. This could even bring about more fundamental changes in China's domestic governance system.

U.S. policymakers need not make this choice for the Chinese people. It is critical that U.S. experts differentiate between forceful regime change, which is commonly viewed as brought about from outside, and regime failure, which emerges from a government's own internal breakdowns. U.S. leaders can talk openly about the latter without suggesting that they endorse the former. Indeed, the United States did exactly this in the Cold War and it did not bring about a third world war in the twenty-first century.[33] Acknowledging the CCP's flaws need not be inflammatory, particularly since many Chinese citizens are growing increasingly frustrated with aspects of their own government's decisionmaking.[34]

It should be acknowledged that a phased approach is not an entirely new strategy. The long-term options presented here might be termed “mellowing or breakup”–indeed, that is what George Kennan labeled them when discussing just this sort of strategy with respect to the Soviet Union.[35] Kennan did not insist that mellowing or breaking up should–or could–happen at the outset of the Cold War. Rather, he acknowledged that the United States would only prevail over the Soviet Union when the Communist Party’s own flaws manifested. The same is true of the CCP today.

No Exit from Rivalry: How Steady States Can Guide Strategy

By Rush Doshi

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The debate around the long-term objectives for U.S. China strategy is intensifying. Does the United States need a definitive "end state" for its competition with China, or is a "steady state" of competition on terms favorable to Washington more realistic? Would either even be enough, or is the focus on the long-term academic when the short-term challenge is so urgent?

Too often what should be a strategic debate breaks down, becoming merely conceptual and semantic. So, for the sake of clarity, "end states" in this context should be understood as a specific vision for how a rivalry ends, be it by war, grand bargains, regime change, or mutual agreement. A "steady state," in contrast, assumes rivalry is more likely to persist than it is to end.

Achieving a steady state is not about what kind of bilateral relationship Washington wants from Beijing, nor is it about the kind of government Americans want for China. The assumption behind a steady state is that there is no exit from this rivalry that is realistic, achievable, or acceptable and around which U.S. policymakers could prudently strategize. A steady state instead revolves around an affirmative vision of which interests the United States should secure and what order it should build in a world where competition with China is a condition to be managed rather than a problem to be solved.

Many proponents of an end state tout its benefits for mobilizing the U.S. public or for reassuring Beijing. But they then fail to put forward an end state that anyone could support. Moreover, they overlook the fact that steady states—when defined with adequate detail—can also work like end states to mobilize or to reassure. When compared with the obvious end states for rivalry, steady states are the only realistic anchor for U.S. strategy. Accordingly, the debate should focus less on how rivalry ends, which the United States cannot control, and more on defining and framing steady states in a world where rivalry continues—all with an eye toward mobilizing Americans, reducing misperceptions, and properly guiding strategy in a future U.S. administration.

New Assessments, New Debates

It is not coincidental that this debate on strategy has intensified as the national consensus on China has shifted. Many in the analytic and policy community believe—as I've argued previously—that the People's Republic of China (PRC) seeks to displace the current order led by the United States and its allies and partners, first at the regional level and now at the global level.[36] They see the PRC preparing to defeat the United States in a protracted military conflict over Taiwan while also pursuing global military bases; working to dominate technologies critical to the "fourth industrial revolution"; increasing the world's dependence on China while decreasing China's dependence on the world; and aligning with Russia, Iran, and North Korea to challenge U.S.-led order. On all sides of the political spectrum, growing numbers of analysts frame this competition as a new Cold War, albeit one fundamentally different from the last.

Although some disagree with these assessments, for now, the center of gravity has shifted. The Biden administration, for example, declared China as the only state with the intent to reshape the international order and as having the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do so.[37]

The darkening national assessment about the scale of China's challenge has led to greater discomfort—even alarm—over the idea that this competition might have no foreseeable end point. This has intensified the question of what the end state for U.S. strategy should be and whether a focus on a "steady state" is sufficient as many analysts look for an exit to rivalry.

No Exit

Throughout history, great power rivalries end in only a few ways, and none offer a realistic escape from the current U.S.-China competition.

First, rivalries can end in war. Yet no serious analyst would propose that the United States could or should seek to militarily subjugate or occupy a nuclear-armed great power to end a strategic rivalry.

Second, they can end with a formal grand bargain. This might mean conceding a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific to China in exchange for the PRC perhaps committing not to use force in the region, including against Taiwan, and accepting the U.S. regional presence. But trading such stark and irreversible U.S. concessions for speculative benefits is foolish, especially if it closes off the world's most dynamic region to PRC hegemony. And in any case, the competition is global, too, spanning most regions of the world and most functional policy domains.

Third, rivalries can end with the collapse of one party. Some writers have hinted that this is the end state that the United States should pursue with regard to the PRC.[38] But doing so makes the competition dangerously more existential than it is now. Moreover, it is unlikely to succeed in any case, and it may just as easily leave the United States with a more aggressive–and still potent–rival.[39]

Fourth, some strategists, such as the RAND Corporation's Michael J. Mazarr, have made the innovative point that rivalries can end by mutual agreement. For example, Britain and France set aside their hostility to deal with a rising Germany. This threat of a rising third power, however, has no analogy in the current U.S.-China rivalry, and transnational challenges, such as climate change, are unlikely to fill that gap. More broadly, given the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s nationalist objectives, Leninist ideology, and deeply rooted paranoia, Beijing is unlikely to exit rivalry due to overt U.S. pressure. Any such exit "will have to emerge organically from Beijing's own thinking," which is precisely why this end state cannot serve as a basis for strategy.[40]

Finally, some analysts reject the preceding four end states and propose an intriguing phased approach. Zack Cooper from the American Enterprise Institute, for example, acknowledges the need for steady states in the short term but believes it necessary to articulate that the United States is "waiting for regime *failure*" even as it does not pursue "forcible regime *change*."[41] This idea of explicitly phasing objectives is interesting and similar to George Kennan's recommendations in the Cold War, and it could be workable. But any strategy that posits Beijing's collapse as the United States' end goal would lead Beijing to see all U.S. actions as part of a cohesive strategy to bring down the CCP. The distinctions between short-term steady states and long-term visions of victory would merely exist in the minds of American strategists. And an approach that declares an interest in regime failure, but then opts to wait for it, would incur the costs of a seemingly provocative end state without necessarily having implications for U.S. policy or for mobilizing Americans. Nonetheless, a phased approach with different ends might provide a plausible path for structuring U.S. strategy.

If the four end states above are unrealistic, and phased approaches cannot necessarily avoid the downsides of the end states they are associated with, then what path remains for a rivalry to end that proponents of end states could support?

The Critiques of Steady States

Rather than answer this question with a clearly defined and realistic end state, many proponents of end states elide it. They instead conflate this debate with other questions: how should U.S. strategy be framed so that it can motivate the U.S. people? How tough should it be practically? Their arguments demonstrate that they see end states not as a strategic device but rather as a political or rhetorical one.

There are two broad camps on opposite sides of the policy spectrum thinking in these terms. Neither puts forward a clear and distinct end state, but each instead offers critiques of steady states that are in reality merely criticisms of other things.

The first camp is uncomfortable with the idea that rivalry is more likely to endure than to end and seeks an end state that can mobilize the U.S. public for what increasingly resembles a cold war. But this is a political argument rather than a strategic one. Mike Gallagher, the clearest proponent of this view, writes that “strategic competition with China will be difficult and expensive” and “American leaders must convince their constituents to sacrifice.” He goes on to indicate the need for an end state because “nobody wants to sacrifice much in pursuit of “managed competition.”[42]

First, it is unclear which end state would mobilize Americans. It is hard to imagine invocations to pursue war, grand bargains, regime collapse, or mutual exit that would mobilize Americans in peacetime competition. Left unstated in these kinds of critique is what the end state should be. Gallagher admirably puts forward an answer, citing Kennan’s “Long Telegram” as providing an end state in the “break-up” or “mellowing” of Soviet power. But only the former is an end state, while the latter is in fact a steady state assuming competition continues. Similarly, when Gallagher approvingly cites the Biden administration’s objective of “building a balance of influence in the world that is maximally favorable to United States [and] our allies and partners” as “something approximating a long-term objective,” he is once again supporting a steady state.[43] This objective—which continues to animate U.S. policy from export controls to shifts in posture to coordination on tariffs—assumes that rivalry persists and that the United States should try to shape the terms of coexistence in its favor with its allies and partners. The aim is not, as other critics charge, simply to “avoid war” or to “change China’s thinking.” It is to advance U.S. interests responsibly amid rivalry.

Second, what proponents of end states often seek is a rhetorical frame that can mobilize Americans, discipline bureaucracies, and restrain vested interests. But it is not clear that an end state would do that. In fact, the best way to mobilize Americans is likely through focusing on how PRC behavior directly harms them and the United States’ future. Such a rhetorical frame—even a cold war frame, should a future administration adopt it—would be consistent with a steady state acknowledging that rivalry is unlikely to decisively end. Discussion of PRC efforts to defeat the U.S. military, surpass the United States technologically, exploit U.S. dependencies in critical minerals and pharmaceuticals, compromise critical infrastructure, export Fentanyl precursors to drug cartels, and silence dissent even beyond China’s borders are more likely to be compelling than abstract visions of victory because these actions directly harm U.S. citizens. This kind of rhetorical mobilization has helped generate bipartisan support for domestic investments that strengthen the United States’ competitiveness, including in infrastructure, semiconductors, scientific research, and manufacturing. But more is needed.

Smaller than the first, the second camp includes those who are uncomfortable with the idea that rivalry is more likely to continue than to end because they fear misperception and escalation. Their criticisms include that, “a strategy of an open-ended competition” is dangerous and that “broadcasting an endless horizon of confrontation will appear to China and others as a sweeping and permanent campaign to undermine its power.”[44] But this analysis is also in error. Acknowledging that rivalry is unlikely to end is not the same as advocating open-ended competition. Put differently, the United States does not have a strategy seeking competition with China but instead a structural reality that forces competition on the United States. For those worried about misperception and escalation, what should be more important than articulating the *end* of competition is articulating the possible *limits* of competition in a world where it continues so that there might be a chance of managing it. This entails making clear that U.S. ambitions are not unlimited but instead tied to U.S. interests. It also means stressing the kind of steady state the United States seeks.

Steady States and a New Administration

Critics have rightly made clear that the current steady state requires further definition. It is important to get the strategic logic for a steady state right. And if that can be accompanied by a public frame that can mobilize Americans, keep allies and partners aligned, and perhaps help manage PRC perceptions, all the better.

Anchoring U.S. strategy on an end state for how rivalry ends is neither realistic nor practical. Nor should U.S. strategy be based entirely on what the United States hopes to avoid, such as conflict. Instead, U.S. strategy should be anchored on a steady state that envisions terms of coexistence—however uneasy and fraught that may be—with the PRC that are maximally favorable to the United States. This might have several components.

First, the ideal steady state should begin with affirmatively outlining the interests that the United States seeks to secure and the kinds of order it hopes to preserve and strengthen. In broad terms, these interests include keeping the Indo-Pacific and wider world free from PRC hegemony, including by maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait; sustaining U.S. technological leadership; ensuring broad-based prosperity for Americans while avoiding dependence on adversaries; and ensuring that the international system allows states to make sovereign decisions and is generally conducive to democracy and liberalism, among other elements.

Second, it should involve some theory of how to get there. There is bipartisan consensus that the United States needs to invest in the sources of its own strength—such as its defense industrial base, technological edge, manufacturing capability—and to align with allies and partners to achieve the scale needed to take on the China challenge. On that foundation, the United States will need to powerfully compete across every regional and functional domain to *blunt* China's provocative actions, including its order-building efforts, and to *build* the foundations for U.S. order. None of this is inconsistent with diplomacy with China that seeks to manage competition, avoid escalation, and enhance transnational cooperation—all of which contribute to a more competitive and sustainable U.S. approach.

Third, a steady state should involve some articulation of what the United States wants from Beijing. It is better to avoid framing the answer in terms of changing China's regime, but instead put it in terms of changing China's actions. There is value in stating that rivalry would lessen dramatically if Beijing would cease threatening its neighbors militarily; increase consumption and reduce excess capacity economically; refrain from interfering in free societies politically; and work in good faith on issues such as climate transnationally, among other elements. To be clear, China is unlikely to make sweeping changes, U.S. and Chinese interests are at odds in many cases, and both sides will continue taking steps that harm the other's interests.

Nonetheless, there is competitive advantage in signaling to Beijing, and to the allies Washington needs to keep on board, that U.S. aims are not unlimited but instead tied to specific interests that are quite reasonable and widely shared by the rest of the world. In some cases, this kind of precision can create bilateral understandings that lead to fragile but real de-escalation and progress in some areas.

Fourth, and finally, the United States needs a public frame for its strategy. For foreign audiences, anchoring strategy on an affirmative vision for the world that speaks to their interests will be more appealing than anchoring it on how a bilateral rivalry ends. Meanwhile, at home, China competition needs a frame that rallies the U.S. people. The next administration should stress that outcompeting China is the United States' main foreign policy priority and necessity, and that the current decade is the critical window to adjust the trend lines in the competition. It should link the China challenge to the interests of everyday Americans, which are real and concrete, rather than rely on abstractions for mobilization. And it should make clear that, while the United States will run hard in the competition, it need not run scared.

All of these propositions for a steady state are debatable. Indeed, this is the debate that is needed. The question of how rivalry ends is somewhat hubristic and premature, particularly when some of the trend lines in the competition need urgent reversal. The questions around how the United States succeeds in rivalry—what objectives it prioritizes, how it strengthens itself after decades of neglect, how it keeps allies and partners on board, how it mobilizes audiences at home and abroad, and how it competes hard while managing escalation—will shape the United States' future. U.S. strategy may or may not need an answer to the question of how rivalry ends, but it certainly needs answers on how best to compete.

China and the United States: Action Versus Reaction

By Elizabeth Economy
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A strategy requires an end goal or a “vision of victory,” and policymakers need a clear objective against which to establish priorities, align resources and capabilities, and make appropriate trade-offs among policy choices. Yet a vision of victory is not enough to ensure a successful strategy. The vision held must be in keeping with the scale and scope of the challenge. While the current U.S. strategy toward China of “managed competition” has a vision of victory, that vision is not adequate to address the grand-scale, multi-dimensional challenge that China poses to U.S. interests. China has articulated a transformative vision for itself, its position in the international system, and the international system itself. Beijing’s policy toward the United States—namely maintaining stability while working to erode U.S. global leadership and the values, norms, and institutions that underpin it—is a function of its grander vision of change for itself and the international system. The United States needs an equally comprehensive vision of victory that includes a vision for itself and for the nature of U.S. leadership in a transformed twenty-first-century international system. Constraining China is only one strand of what must be a much larger strategy.

Grand Vision

Chinese leader Xi Jinping's vision of victory is clear. He seeks to create a system predicated on Chinese values, interests, and institutional preferences which redefines both the international system and China's position in it. Much, if not all, of this vision is antithetical to U.S. values and interests.

Xi's objectives include a dramatically expanded Chinese physical territory and maritime domain that reflect the realization of Chinese sovereignty claims over contested territories, such as Taiwan, the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, territory on the Sino-Indian border, and land within Nepal and Bhutan, among others. Xi's vision also includes dominion over 80 percent of the South China Sea.

In addition, Xi seeks to position China as the dominant economic, political, and military power within the broader Asia Pacific, supplanting the United States. According to Xi, "it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia."[45] The United States is thus not a legitimate voice in regional affairs. He has established new trade and investment institutions, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the Silk Road Fund, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, that bind the region's economies more closely to China. Chinese investment in the region rose by 37 percent between 2022 and 2023, making China the largest single investor in the region (although Chinese investment has still not attained pre-Covid levels).[46] Moreover, under Xi's leadership, China is rapidly developing the capabilities to challenge the United States' military preeminence in the Asia Pacific, including an apparent new basing opportunity for the People's Liberation Army Navy in Cambodia.

Beyond seeking China's primacy in the Asia Pacific, Xi is transforming China's role on the global stage through four initiatives–the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), the Global Development Initiative (GDI), and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI). Combined, these projects are designed to transform the geopolitical, economic, and strategic landscapes in ways that reflect Chinese interests, supporting a set of norms and institutions aimed at eroding those of the current international system. The BRI, for example, has provided as much as $1 trillion in financing and investment for global infrastructure projects in emerging and middle-income economies. At the same time, it serves as a vehicle for the export of China's own development model (and control) through rapid, debt-inducing infrastructure investment with poor transparency and weak labor, environmental, and social safeguards. China also uses the BRI to gain support for political elements of its governing model. Alongside the export of technology, for example, China has provided cybersecurity training to over three dozen countries, including how to monitor and control dissenting opinions.[47] The GSI also advances a set of norms and values that undermine the current order. The GSI calls for the end of formal alliance structures (e.g., NATO) and supports the notion that one state's security cannot come at the expense of another's. Russia used this principle of "indivisible security" to justify its invasion of Ukraine, and China could follow suit in any military action against Taiwan. Further, both the GDI and GCI undermine the notion of inalienable and universal political and civil rights by claiming that all states have the power to determine the rights of their citizens depending on their history, culture, system, and development. Finally, China is working hard to advance the de-dollarization of the global economy.

Xi’s vision is engendering a new reality in the U.S.-China relationship. Competition between the two countries is not merely economic, nor is it simply between rising and status quo powers. Instead, the U.S.-China relationship much further reaching. It is a competition for the values and structure of the international system itself and leadership of that system. The United States sees China as a revisionist power trying to undermine U.S. global leadership, while China believes that the United States is trying to contain its growing influence and power and is working to prevent China from realizing its legitimate right to define the rules of international engagement. The two countries stand on opposite sides of the current major military conflicts—between Israel and the Palestinians, and between Russia and Ukraine. There is also the potential for the United States and China to end up in direct military conflict in the Indo-Pacific over Taiwan or over territorial disputes that involve U.S. treaty allies, such as Japan or the Philippines. Each major power also backs a different set of multilateral organizations. For example, China supports the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, the BRICS, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, while the United States supports the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), the G7, and NATO. Xi does not shy away from acknowledging the system-level competition underway, claiming that the “rising east and declining west” is the “most prominent” feature of today’s world, suggesting the inevitable triumph of socialism over capitalism.[48]

Limited Line of Sight

As Xi has moved to execute his strategy, successive U.S. administrations have struggled to keep pace. What has emerged over the course of the Obama, Trump, and now Biden administrations has been a series of China strategies that are too reactive and piecemeal.

The current U.S. strategy toward China—“managed competition”—reflects a highly discrete set of objectives, not a comprehensive plan. The United States seeks to maintain a comparative advantage over China in core technologies and military capabilities, push back against Chinese political and military incursions globally, rally support from U.S. allies and partners, and prevent the U.S.-China relationship from devolving into kinetic conflict.

In practical terms, this has translated into a policy built on three and a half pillars. First, the United States is investing in the technology, education, innovation, and manufacturing ecosystems necessary to enable it to compete effectively with China in the twenty-first century through the CHIPS and Science Act, Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and Inflation Reduction Act (IRA).

Second, it is working to align its policies with those of its allies and partners. In recognition that the United States cannot effectively compete or counter China by itself, the Biden administration has aggressively courted other countries and created new institutions (e.g., IPEF, AUKUS, and the U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council) as well as informal groupings (e.g., the U.S.-Japan-ROK trilateral). These partnerships are designed to coordinate policies across an array of U.S. priority areas, such as the green transition, supply chain resiliency, military technology, and AI governance. Many of these policies either explicitly or implicitly are directed at China.

And third, the United States is directly competing with China. This competition includes ensuring that the United States has the appropriate economic, military, and political tools to secure a number of U.S. objectives, including a peaceful and stable environment in the Indo-Pacific, a global investment environment that respects the rule of law, and the wherewithal to push back against Beijing's efforts to advance authoritarianism globally. These tools include, for example, export controls on military-related technologies, new U.S.-supported investment initiatives (e.g., IPEF and Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment), and U.S. leadership in international organizations, such as the International Telecommunications Union.

For the current administration, managing competition also requires developing channels of communication with China to identify and, where possible, address U.S. concerns. The channels focus on issues affecting both countries, including ensuring operational safety between the U.S. and Chinese militaries; addressing the U.S. fentanyl crisis, third-world debt, and AI governance; creating a level economic playing field; countering climate change; and expanding civil society engagement. Progress has been constrained, however, by a limited willingness to compromise on both sides.

Broadening the Horizon

Managed competition is a strategy with two primary goals: (1) preventing the U.S.-China relationship from deteriorating further; and (2) providing the time and space needed to rebuild the foundations of U.S. political, economic, and military competitiveness. However, while ensuring that the foundations of U.S. strength are robust is necessary for "winning" in the competition with China, it is not sufficient. The United States needs a strategy that takes aim at China's claim that it (along with Russia) is driving the transformative changes in the world.[49] The United States needs an understanding of victory that includes a vision of itself and its global leadership in the twenty-first century. The strategy for China should anchored within this larger vision of victory.

Winning in this context means that the values, norms, and broad policy preferences of the United States continue to underpin the future of the international system. As articulated by Samantha A. Taylor of the U.S. Army War College, these values include: "open and free trade, liberal democratic governance, universal human rights, collective security, international institutions, and the rule of law."[50] The overarching U.S. strategy will require a return to a U.S. consensus around what international relations scholar Kori Schake has termed conservative internationalism, in which the United States commits to "promote American security and economic power while supporting the expansion of democracy around the world."[51] Schake's prescription for how to get there includes a list of traditional pre-Trump and pre-Biden U.S. values and commitments: advancing free trade, providing a level playing field for U.S. companies, opposing authoritarianism, promoting the rule of law in immigration policy, ensuring a strong military, cooperating with allies to advance shared interests, and enhancing U.S. power in international institutions. These elements are essential to a winning strategy, and many are already represented in the U.S. National Security Strategy.[52]

But the United States cannot go back to the future. The world has changed and U.S. strategy must account for that change. The relative economic weight of China and India in global GDP terms is now roughly equal to that of the European Union and Japan, respectively; and of the world's fastestgrowing economies in 2024, nine are in Africa.[53] Spurred by China, many emerging and middle-income economies are working to de-dollarize the global economy by trading and investing in their own currencies. In addition, new military alignments, such as the one between China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea in support of Russia's war against Ukraine, are emerging and pose significant new challenges to U.S. security interests. While the United States remains the world's most powerful military, of the next four, only South Korea is a treaty ally.

The changed relative and absolute limitations of U.S. military and economic power mean that the United States needs to make explicit a different conception of global leadership—one that reflects a greater role for its closest allies and partners, for example, in the G7, in shaping and driving the future international system. Some of this is already occurring. Japan, for example, has stepped up to lead in advancing multilateral trade agreements. In addition, the evolution of the hub-and-spoke alliance system into a "lattice" framework in the Indo-Pacific recognizes the importance of other regional powers playing larger roles in guaranteeing regional stability through a set of informal and formal minilateral arrangements across multiple economic and security domains. In spite of these positive developments, the United States needs to stay ahead of this shifting power dynamic and consider what new security structures may be needed and whether and how to defend the dollar's position as the world's reserve currency.

The United States will also need to address its failure over the past eight years to develop a compelling vision for global trade. Within the Biden administration's mantra of "a foreign policy for the middle class" is a deep suspicion of international trade, and this has left the United States without a seat at the table as the future international trading system is being designed. The administration dropped out of the World Trade Organization e-commerce negotiations being led by three of its closest partners—Australia, Singapore, and Japan—and pulled out of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), a trade arrangement which not only includes its closest Asian allies but also accounts for over 40 percent of the global goods trade. Without U.S. leadership in structuring these deals, the country's role in shaping the international system is diminished, and U.S. consumers and businesses lose out as others reap the benefits of lower tariffs and efficiencies in integrated supply chains.

Moreover, the United States should consider how it can most effectively engage with emerging and middle-income economies. The Biden administration has worked hard to rebuild relations with its closest allies and partners in Asia and Europe. But without an equally committed effort to build stronger ties with countries in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, the United States cannot "win" a global contest to shape the international system of the twenty-first century. These countries are essential to U.S. efforts aimed at shaping Chinese behavior on issues such as human rights; internet governance; illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing; freedom of navigation; and climate change. Without their support in international regimes and institutions, China will continue to make gains in reshaping the international system to advance its own values and interests.

The United States should start by bringing emerging and middle-income economies to the table to be part of the decisionmaking processes. This is particularly the case for some of the newest and most pressing issues, including AI governance and workforce retraining. Making decisions with only advanced economies participating will alienate these countries, who rightly believe that their voices should also be heard and respected. Furthermore, the United States should meet these countries where they are at; in other words, the United States must take account of their needs and interests and work with them to achieve those objectives as well. The CHIPS and Science Act and the IRA both have the potential to offer these countries opportunities to participate in major U.S. economic and innovation initiatives, for example. Weaving countries in Africa and Latin America into the educational, innovation, and manufacturing ecosystem of the CHIPs and Science Act and the IRA would send a powerful signal of support from the United States and begin to build a sense of investment in partnering with the United States. The United States should also consider expanding security cooperation with countries in these regions; currently, of the 20 countries the United States has designated as major non-NATO allies, only 6 are in Latin America or Africa.

Finally, the United States needs a clear set of metrics to evaluate how it is faring in this “all-of-system” competition with China over time in order to determine the need for strategy adjustments. Such metrics should include votes in the United Nations, the number of technical standards in core technologies, immigration statistics, and resolution of major military conflicts, among others.

A winning U.S.-China strategy will require leadership that prioritizes investing in the foundations of U.S. economic, political, and military strength. The United States will need to develop new forms of global leadership that elevate the role of allies and partners. Most important, however, the overall vision of victory enacted will need to embrace and help shape the dynamics of change in the international system in ways that acknowledge and invite in the needs and interests of the rest of the world.

Preserve Order and Prevent Upheaval

By Richard Fontaine

CEO, Center for a New American Security

To invoke the U.S.-Chinese rivalry as a defining feature of today's world is now commonplace, and analysts and policymakers across the political spectrum support the United States' shift away from engagement and toward competition. Jettisoning Washington's previous strategy of cooperation and integration, premised as it was on the eventual transformation of Chinese behavior, has become a rare point of agreement between the Trump and Biden administrations. The next U.S. administration, irrespective of its makeup, is likely to retain this fundamental orientation in its approach to China.

That is a welcome shift, given the paucity of positive results yielded by the previous approach. China and the United States are in a largely competitive relationship, and U.S. policy aims to respond to Chinese actions more than to shape them. A strategy grounded in this reality–one that combines a U.S.-led coalition with targeted, issue-specific efforts to contest Chinese assertiveness–is now emerging to protect U.S. interests and values.

There remains, however, a significant omission in U.S. policy: an objective. Competition is merely a description of U.S.-Chinese relations, not an end in and of itself. Conspicuously absent from the flurry of speeches, strategy documents, and policy pronouncements is the endgame that Washington ultimately seeks with China. Without a clearly defined goal, any overarching strategy is likely to waste resources, frustrate attempts to track progress, and elude the broad-based domestic support necessary to sustain it. U.S. allies and partners wish—and deserve—to know the objective of the coalitions in which Washington increasingly seeks to enlist them. The absence of a clear goal for its self-proclaimed top priority is a liability for Washington—and one that it should urgently work to address.

Eyes on the Prize

Good strategies articulate a desired end state and outline how to attain it. In his famous 1947 *Foreign Affairs* article, for instance, diplomat and historian George Kennan argued for "either the breakup or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power," to be pursued through a combined policy of containment and an effort to increase the strains under which the Soviets operated.[54] Establishing such an objective, as the United States did early in the Cold War, explicitly ruled out other possible goals, such as a partnership and political intimacy between Washington and Moscow on the one hand or the active rollback of communism on the other. Having identified the collapse—or at least moderation—of Moscow's regime as their aim, U.S. officials pursued containment as the strategy most likely to yield the desired positive results.[55]

After the end of the Cold War, the United States established a set of objectives for China and theorized about how to achieve them. In 1997, U.S. president Bill Clinton said that Washington's goal vis-à-vis Beijing "is not containment and conflict; it is cooperation," noting that "a pragmatic policy of engagement" was most likely to bring about that end. By engaging Beijing, primarily but not exclusively through trade, the Clinton administration aimed to cultivate a "stable, open, and non-aggressive" China.[56] U.S. policymakers postulated that such openness might even foster liberalization and political pluralism within China itself.

The George W. Bush administration largely retained the goal of a cooperative and liberalizing China, adding to it a wish that the country would become a "responsible stakeholder" in the international system. Washington would seek areas of active cooperation with Beijing across the spectrum of global challenges, from terrorism to energy conservation, in hopes that Chinese leaders would become invested and active in addressing them. Perhaps less certain than its predecessor in the prospects for cooperation, the Bush administration hedged its bets by boosting U.S. military capabilities and bolstering alliances and partnerships throughout Asia.

The Obama administration shared many of the Bush administration's objectives, but it hedged even more heavily as doubts about Beijing's direction and goals grew. Still, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton rejected the notion of an adversarial Beijing, saying that it was "essential" for the United States and China to have "a positive, cooperative relationship."[57] The administration announced a "pivot" or "rebalance" to Asia aimed at forging such a relationship by embedding it in a "regional framework of security alliances, economic networks, and social connections" that would strengthen the United States' position.[58]

The Trump administration ushered in a new era of U.S.-Chinese relations. Under Trump, the United States neither sought a cooperative relationship with Beijing nor pursued engagement as the central means for securing U.S. interests. Rejecting the notion that integration into the global order would spur either Chinese liberalization or responsible international behavior, the Trump administration labeled Beijing a “revisionist power” with which the United States would have a fundamentally competitive relationship. Trump’s Indo-Pacific strategy, declassified in the waning days of his presidency, takes malign Chinese activity as a given to be resisted, often in concert with partners.[59] The Trump administration was no model of message discipline, however, and key policymakers differed on the desired end state. Whereas Trump predicted in 2020 that his bilateral trade deal would “bring both the U.S. and China closer together in so many other ways,” Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that same year that the United States “must induce China to change” and suggested that efforts to replace the regime in Beijing might be on the table.[60]

The Biden administration largely retained Trump’s diagnosis of a fundamentally competitive U.S.-China relationship and dismissed previous hopes of transforming China through U.S. policy. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin referred to China as the Pentagon’s top priority.[61] Secretary of State Antony Blinken described China as “the biggest geopolitical test” of the twenty-first century.[62] And President Joe Biden himself stated that he envisions “extreme competition” between Washington and Beijing.[63] A long period of managed competition, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said, “is simply not going to resolve in a neat and decisive end state.” Instead, in Blinken’s words, the United States seeks to “coexist peacefully” with China, and to “share in and contribute to human progress together.”[64]

To be sure, any brief review of the past several administrations’ China policies risks attributing a coherence and continuity to their strategies that did not always exist. Governments are not unitary actors, objectives and approaches change with shifting circumstances and players, and public pronouncements can conflict with private aims. Yet for much of the time since the end of the Cold War and, particularly, during the years of U.S. engagement with China, Washington’s objectives with regard to Beijing were generally explicit. That is no longer the case.

From the Bottom Up

The fate of the U.S.-Chinese relationship has profound global implications, and so the objective of U.S. policy should flow from the kind of order Washington wishes to obtain–and the kind of threat China poses to that order. The United States generally seeks to maintain a global order governed by rules rather than by brute power, one in which countries enjoy sovereignty, disputes are resolved peacefully, markets are open to trade, human rights are considered universal, and democracy can flourish. Although the United States’ own track record in upholding such principles is hardly perfect, the country has nevertheless championed them as ideals that should govern international behavior. Since the 1940s, Washington has opposed hostile spheres of influence emerging in Eurasia precisely because they threaten the United States’ desired rules-based order.[65] The overarching goal of U.S. policy today should be to preserve the core pillars of the international order, even as specific rules and institutions change and adapt.

From that overarching goal should flow the objective of U.S. policy toward China. Given China’s growing military and technological power, its assertive behavior, its economic interdependence with the United States and its allies, and the incompatibility of many Chinese actions with the existing order, Washington should articulate an objective that is both realistic and protective of its people. The aim of U.S. policy toward China should be to ensure that Beijing is either unwilling or unable to overturn the regional and global order.

China might cease trying to upend elements of the liberal order if its leaders come to see the strength of the countries that are committed to them and the vigor with which they oppose China's disruptive efforts. Beijing might someday even see its own future in the preservation of the liberal order. Even if it does not, it could grow incapable of undermining the order for any number of reasons: Beijing's own weaknesses, the unpalatability of its authoritarian vision in other countries, or a relative strengthening of the powers committed to the liberal status quo, to name a few.

A China that is unwilling or unable to undermine the regional and global order is a fairly abstract goal for U.S. policy, but it would nonetheless rule out several other potential objectives. With such an end in mind, Washington would not aim to transform China into a liberal power or a responsible stakeholder in the international system. Washington would not work toward Cold War-style containment or regime change in Beijing. And it would not aim to stop China's rise but rather oppose Beijing's efforts to disrupt existing international arrangements in ways that damage the United States and its partners.

Progress toward this objective would almost certainly be a matter of degree, but it could be measured (unlike progress toward the broad notions of competition or coexistence). China's approach to global rules and norms is varied, however. Beijing does not seek to simply repeal and replace what currently exists but rather to reject some principles, accept others, and rewrite the remainder. Such subtlety should help define U.S. priorities, as Washington should focus on preserving those elements of the liberal order that are simultaneously of greatest importance to U.S. interests and under the most threat from Chinese behavior.

A medium-term policy agenda would naturally flow from such a goal. The United States would seek to improve its military position in the Indo-Pacific relative to China; it would contest China's use of economic coercion, including through an ambitious regional trade policy that aims to reduce countries' reliance on the Chinese market. The United States would promote building new technology partnerships to ensure the free flow of information and focus existing alliances on protecting democracies from external interference. Washington would, in other words, continue many of the efforts that currently fall under the broad umbrella of competition, but it would channel them toward resisting Chinese attempts to upend key elements of the liberal order.

All of this would entail a shift in how Washington communicates—and thinks about—its China policy. The United States would not strictly be competing against China but rather be working toward the preservation and extension of core international values that serve many nations, including the United States. Its partners would not be required to break their ties with China in order to join a unified bloc, but they would be encouraged to join coalitions aimed at resisting Beijing on specific issues, such as economic coercion, military aggression, the spread of illiberal technologies, and human rights abuses, among others. The accompanying message, despite Beijing's claims to the contrary, would be that Washington does not seek to suppress China's rise but rather to establish a U.S.-Chinese equilibrium in the long term.

Reckoning Day

The United States and the world can live with a powerful China that does not attempt to overturn key principles of the liberal order. At the moment, however, that possibility seems remote. The military balance in the Indo-Pacific is shifting away from the United States and its allies and toward Beijing. China is becoming increasingly economically dominant in Asia, with Washington noticeably absent from any real leadership on trade. Chinese diplomacy is growing more coercive and more focused on the internal affairs of other countries, undermining the latter's sovereignty and independence. Although cooperation with Beijing is desirable and theoretically possible, it is in very short supply, even in areas in which U.S. and Chinese interests seem to overlap, such as climate change and pandemic disease.

Reversing these trends is no easy task. It will take years and involve risks. Diplomacy can help mitigate the risks, but only to a limited degree. The United States will need to accept increased tension in the medium term in order to achieve a more stable equilibrium with China in the long term.

Every month, it seems, U.S. policymakers sound the alarm about the U.S.-Chinese relationship with greater volume. Across party lines and branches of government, increasing numbers of policymakers now endorse a major response to the China challenge. The watchwords are more resources, more speed, more vigor. And all of this is appropriate. But Washington would do well to clarify what, precisely, this national effort aims to achieve.

Renewing American Leadership Requires More than Countering China

By Ryan Hass

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It has been heartening to see the recent invigoration of discussion around the need for clarity on the goals of U.S. strategy toward China. Effective strategy requires clear goals.[66] Over the past three years, the U.S.-China relationship has become more functional and stable, even as it remains intensively competitive. As laudable as this progress has been, the Biden administration has fallen short in articulating goals for its relationship with China.

The Biden administration's foreign policy record has been strongest on its progress in deepening America's relationships with key allies and partners. With creativity, tenacity, and good diplomacy, the Biden team has launched an alphabet soup of minilateral groupings which collectively have improved the United States' posture in Asia. The sum of these efforts equals greater U.S. influence and stronger deterrence against any attempts to redraw borders through threat or use of force.

The Biden administration also has unlocked a massive wave of investment aimed at upscaling the United States. With over $2 trillion allocated through the Inflation Reduction Act, the CHIPS and Science Act, and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, the Biden team has made generational investments in clean energy, semiconductors, and advanced manufacturing. These efforts have attracted many global firms to crowd-in their support for these industries, contributing to America becoming the world's top recipient of inbound investment in 2023.

On the critical question of America's goals for its relationship with China, however, the Biden administration has not been clear. To the extent leaders have addressed the question, they have tended to explain what the United States seeks to *avoid*—a new Cold War, confrontation or conflict, containment of China, or full economic decoupling from China—not what it seeks.

In attempting to clarify, at least partially, the boundaries of the U.S. approach toward China, the Biden administration aims to attract greater alignment with partners regarding China while still maintaining a firm handle on competition with China. In leaving U.S. objectives open to interpretation, and not black and white, the administration provides—perhaps intentionally, perhaps not—allies and partners with greater political space to work alongside the United States. In other words, the Biden team seeks to demonstrate competence and steadiness in building coalitions and in navigating competition with a nuclear-armed rival, while giving its partners flexibility.

Even so, calculated ambiguity in explaining the goals of U.S. strategy on China carries risks. First, it feeds a perception of President Biden as lacking the vision and boldness needed to confront what his administration has identified as America's most serious foreign policy challenge. Second, if Americans do not know the purpose of a particular strategy, they are less likely to support sacrifices in service of it.[67] Third, with this approach, the United States risks squandering one of its asymmetric advantages—its global network of allies and partners for dealing with challenges posed by China. If America's partners do not know the desired destination of U.S. strategy, there is greater risk that they will hedge.

Unsurprisingly, experts have begun filling the vacuum left by the Biden administration's decision not to articulate clear affirmative goals vis-à-vis China. Unfortunately, however, the expert debate has run into an intellectual cul-de-sac. On one side, there are advocates of regime change, on the other, proponents of managed coexistence. This binary framing turns on a judgment about whether a strong China poses an intolerable threat to the United States and its way of life. To some, the answer is yes. To others, it is closer to maybe not; for the latter, it remains possible for the United States to coexist with China, even amid intense competition.

While an interesting intellectual debate, this is not a sound basis for developing strategy. First, as history has shown, the United States is not capable of determining China's governance system. If the United States could not alter Cuba's governance structure—a small island 90 miles off the coast of Florida—it should not expect to affect the CCP's grip on power; the same logic could be applied to Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Venezuela.

Second, the United States and China are not captains of two rival blocs with fixed geographic boundaries, as was the case during the Cold War. Instead, both countries exist within the same international system, are entangled within the same global web, and are both vying for greater relative influence over its future direction. Washington and Beijing are competing to establish a favorable balance of power. They both want to maximize their freedom of maneuver and limit dependence on the other. They are striving to outpace and outperform the other rather than to defeat them. Indeed, as both realize, if ever one side did vanquish the other, they would harm themselves in the process, given the depth of interdependence that exists between the United States and China.

Critics will counter that the United States won the Cold War by toppling the Soviet Union. In this telling, the United States should employ a similar playbook for confronting China, including by working to contain China's global expansion of influence and limiting China's capacity to grow its economy. These critics celebrate President Reagan's unflinching determination to stare down the Soviet Union and clamor for a strong U.S. leader to do the same against China. They overlook the fact that virtually no other country in the world would join the United States in seeking to contain China today. Moreover, America is incapable of containing China alone. These critics also elide the fact that out of the Soviet Union's collapse grew Putin's Russia, not an outcome worth celebrating or seeking to emulate. The brave people of Ukraine are a living testament to this sad reality.

Rather than drawing imprecise historical analogies to justify ideological pursuits against China, the more central questions policymakers should ask are: (1) What kind of world do Americans want to live in during the twenty-first century, and (2) what type of relationship with China would best support such a scenario?

For decades, U.S. policymakers had the luxury of not having to grapple with these questions. America enjoyed primacy in international affairs. Now, however, the era of *Pax Americana* is over. U.S. power is contested around the globe, as are U.S. invocations of a "rules-based international order." The United States and China are both capable of harming the other; and neither rival can secure absolute security against the other. America's ability to control the outcomes of events worldwide has diminished and continues to do so. This is the present-day reality.

The world is entering a unique era of fluidity. Comparable precedents include the ends of the Napoleonic era, of World War II, and of the Cold War. Geopolitical tectonic plates are shifting as power changes and disperses. The impact of these shifts is being exacerbated by concurrent industrial revolutions—in artificial intelligence, biotechnology, clean energy, and elsewhere.

In this moment of transition, the goal of U.S. strategy should be to maximally advance the security, prosperity, and wellbeing of the American people. Doing so will require holding firm on—and securing as broad of a buy-in as possible from other countries for—several key principles and conditions. Preserving the post-World War II norm that national boundaries should not be redrawn through threat or use of force must remain, a norm that has been honored in the breech recently with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The United States also should rally global support for upholding open access to the global commons, including international waters and airspace. Washington must coordinate with allies and partners to prevent any single power from dominating Asia and establishing a closed sphere of influence. The United States should work to become more of a model for upholding the human rights it advocates protecting around the world. Washington also should strive to preserve an open, rules-based international trading system, which would support diversification of value and supply chains and limit the ability of any power to corner the market on key products and inputs.

The American people's security, prosperity, and wellbeing depends upon collective efforts to confront global challenges. One of the largest casualties of the breakdown in U.S.-China relations over the past seven years has been the abandonment of efforts to coordinate global responses to immediate challenges. The debilitating spectacle of Beijing and Washington engaging in nationalist blamesmanship instead of leading international efforts to tackle Covid-19 was a glaring example of the baleful consequences of the U.S.-China relationship becoming singularly defined by mutual enmity.[68]

While it is more comfortable and self-satisfying to coordinate responses to crises within a cocoon of like-minded partners, such an approach will only hasten the United States' abdication of global leadership. To best protect its interests, Washington needs to truly lead on the world stage, not merely settle to serve as leader of the G7. Global leadership means being capable of pulling in and pooling resources from the world's most capable countries, including those with whom the United States disagrees, such as China.

America has experience pulling China into responses to global challenges, including in response to the 2014 outbreak of Ebola, Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons, calls for greater UN peacekeeping capacity, and climate change, to cite a few examples. To do so again, Washington will need to return to first principles. Among these, Washington will need to demonstrate in word and deed that it is willing to share leadership with China when Beijing materially contributes to solutions for global challenges. China's leaders crave recognition as global leaders, and this desire should be better leveraged to extract concrete Chinese contributions, such as in Gaza's reconstruction, the development of a global emerging disease surveillance network, and investments in the green energy transition.

Achieving this will require the United States to rethink its global position and to pursue global leadership in lieu of centering its foreign policy on competition with China, regardless of whether Beijing remains fixed in its dark view of hostile U.S. intentions. This will necessitate U.S. policymakers adopting a broader framework for evaluating the impact of Chinese actions beyond a narrow threat-based prism, currently in vogue in Washington. Viewing every Chinese action as threatening produces pressure on U.S. policymakers to react to every Chinese move, without regard as to whether the Chinese action implicates vital U.S. interests or even whether the United States' response helps or hinders its own long-term interests. Viewing Chinese actions as primarily threatening has forced U.S. foreign policy to become increasingly reactive and defensive, when the present global moment calls for the United States to be bold, ambitious, and optimistic about leveraging its strengths to lead globally.

Now, with the acceleration of climate change, the growing wave of climate-induced migration, armed conflicts, the likelihood of another pandemic, and the societal disruptions that artificial intelligence will engender, there is a crying need for global leadership. In this post-unipolar moment, the United States will need to draw on as much support as it can muster to address these and other challenges in line with its interests, including from China.

Enlisting greater Chinese buy-in for tackling global challenges will not be easy, nor will it be satisfying. Beijing will insist on doing things its own way. Chinese leaders will continue to support and sympathize with countries that oppose U.S. leadership, including Russia, Iran, and North Korea. Even so, Beijing's goal is not to become captain of a team of aggrieved and isolated powers. Rather, it desires to become a respected global power. China lacks the power to achieve this outcome through conquest or use of force. Yet President Xi and those around him still covet recognition as global statesmen, peacemakers, and leaders for the coming century.

To be clear, shared pursuits will not dull the intensely competitive nature of U.S.-China relations. Nor will they reduce the imperative for the United States to bolster its military posture in Asia. After all, China will still claim Taiwan and will continue to develop advanced military capabilities in order to assert greater control over its periphery. As China's military capabilities rise, so too will the bar for the United States and its partners to maintain credible deterrence against Chinese aggression.

Deterring Chinese assertions of control over contested territories is necessary, but it is an insufficient response to the challenge at hand. A core pillar of America's strategy must be, as Ben Rhodes suggested, to "revitalize U.S. innovation and advanced manufacturing, disentangle critical supply chains from China, and maintain a lead for U.S. companies in developing new and potentially transformative technologies."[69]

Thus, to lead effectively, U.S. leaders will need to create conditions which enable the United States to continue serving as a magnet for global talent, technology, and capital, including from China. These are key ingredients for the United States to maintain an overall edge in innovation. It is increasingly clear that whichever country leads in technological innovation in the coming century will enjoy preponderant influence in the international system.

In sum, U.S. policymakers need to realize that their obsession with countering China is blinding them to larger dynamics in the international system and thus limiting the United States' chance to renew its global leadership. Neither attempts to vanquish China nor aspirations to coexist with it are credible end goals for the purpose-built strategy for which the current moment calls.

Embedding its approach to China within a broader framework for renewing global leadership will allow the United States to regain initiative. It will help rebuild U.S. capacity to galvanize solutions to global challenges by bringing U.S. priorities in closer alignment with those of its partners. It will strengthen the United States' hand to push back firmly when China attempts to challenge core principles. At the same time, such an approach holds the potential to open space for China to contribute more to global challenges.

The United States' foremost priority is to lead in a twenty-first-century multipolar world, rather than to downsize itself into a regional power or a mere captain of a collection of democracies. To move in this direction, U.S. policymakers will need clarity and firmness on what principles it must uphold, as well as flexibility and creativity in creating (and leading) broad coalitions of capable countries, including China, to tackle pressing challenges and to develop rules and norms for future ones. Policymakers also will need to prioritize strategies for accelerating innovation within the United States.

These steps are well within America's reach. For all its challenges, the United States remains uniquely positioned to lead in this coming century, if it plays its cards right. The more it does so, the better positioned it will be to address challenges posed by China in the twenty-first century.

The End Goal Should Be Avoiding Conflicts

By Yasheng Huang
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In 1848, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote, “A specter is haunting Europe–the specter of Communism. All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this specter.”[70] Today, America is haunted by the specter of a Cold War. Many key stakeholders–members of Congress, voters, social media commentators, and geopolitical strategists–have entered into an alliance to exorcise this specter.

The Cold War ended in a collapse of the Soviet Union, and some in the policy community advocate for a collapse of the Chinese Communist Party’s regime in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as an end goal of U.S. policy toward China. Regime collapse is such a complex phenomenon rooted in a myriad of conditions, dynamics, and factors, many of which are simply beyond any realistic conception of what the United States can achieve in its foreign policy. That purported goal does not provide a meaningful direction and reliable guide for how to think about international relations, and it does not account for the deep complexities of the relationship between China and the United States.

There is a saying in management education, “Operation is strategy.” While some critics deride “managed competition” as a mere process, getting process right is precisely what the United States needs to confront the geopolitical challenges of a China that has abandoned its previous pragmatic working relationships with the West, but also a China with which the United States has built up some deep and productive connections and ties.

The policy of the Biden administration is known as “managed competition.” As a concept, managed competition permits a degree of flexibility in U.S. policy toward China—tough in areas where necessary and collaborative in areas where desired. It is also a concept that does not set out assuming a China that is completely set in stone; rather, it is a China that, however reluctantly, slowly, and often imperceptibly, may still respond to a combination of incentives, punitive acts, and confrontational postures.

China Is Not a New Soviet Union

A U.S. policy toward China designed to achieve a complete victory is based on a loose reading of history, and prescriptively it is a highly risky idea. First, it is worth clarifying some fundamental distinctions between the Soviet Union of the Cold War era and China today.

In 1956, the Soviet Union invaded Hungary, and in 1961, the Berlin Wall was built with tacit or explicit encouragement from the Soviet Union. In 1962, the Soviet Union’s placement of missiles in Cuba prompted the Kennedy administration to impose a naval blockade, bringing the world to the brink of nuclear Armageddon for 13 days. In 1968, the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia, and in 1979, it invaded Afghanistan. Today, Russia, the successor state to the Soviet Union, is waging an active war of aggression against Ukraine.

China has adopted an aggressive and destabilizing geopolitical stance toward Taiwan and in the South China Sea, matched with strident and virulent anti-Western, anti-American rhetoric that is deeply unsettling. Historically, it has engaged in border clashes with Vietnam and India. That said, China has not engaged in reckless behavior that has brought the world to the brink of World War III or nuclear Armageddon in the same way the Soviet Union did during the Cold War. The United States needs to be vigilant, clear-eyed, and attentive to the geopolitical intentions and actions of the PRC, but a factually loose and selective analogy between China and the Soviet Union is misleading.

Although some analysts assert with certainty that the Soviet Union collapsed because of the confrontational policy of the Reagan administration, that view is an oversimplification of history. The arms race with the United States and significant military expenditures did strain the Soviet economy, and President Ronald Reagan’s policies—including increased defense spending and the Strategic Defense Initiative—put additional pressure on Moscow. But the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted from a host of other complex developments, such as the reform programs launched by Mikhail Gorbachev and long-term economic stagnation. Also, unlike China, the Soviet Union’s composition—with distinct ethnic and nationalistic groups that overlapped with the entity’s political boundaries—also contributed to its unitary frailties.

There are many counterexamples in the world. North Korea and Cuba did not collapse despite years of sanctions imposed by the West and isolation. History does not repeat, and in this case it may not even rhyme. Adopting a “vision of victory” designed to destabilize China or otherwise provoke internal change has a very small likelihood of achieving its professed goal, while its provocative rationale risks getting the United States involved in an escalation of conflicts with China. Designing a policy around the idea of causing regime collapse is not only lacking in realism–it is prone to many problematic, unintended consequences.

The Biden administration has, by and large, struck the right balance between cooperation and confrontation in its articulation of policy toward China. One can quibble exactly where the administration should come down in that difficult and delicate balancing act, but the general approach is one that the United States should continue to embrace in the future. The overarching goal of the United States' policy toward China should be avoiding conflicts, and that goal sometimes requires a confrontational stance and sometimes requires active diplomacy and acts of cooperation.

The concept of "managed competition" is not only a prudent approach, it is rooted in the complexity that defines the very nature of the relationship between China and the United States, a level of complexity that was entirely absent during the Cold War. For instance, collaboration with China is essential to addressing climate change. And even amid trade wars and derisking, China remains an important economic and trading partner with the United States. Scientists of the two countries have collaborated with each other on important and meaningful basic research projects that benefit not only the two countries but all of humankind. One area of fruitful research is in agriculture, as noted by a report of the Carter Center.[71]

A policy that is single-handedly punitive can backfire on the United States. The trade war with China is one example; it damaged the Chinese economy but also produced a negative effect on the United States. The bout of inflation that the United States experienced resulted from supply chain disruptions during the Covid-19 pandemic, but the trade war with China further constrained the supply capacity and exacerbated the transitory inflationary pressures.[72] A widespread view is that China hoarded pandemic-related medical supplies during the Covid-19 outbreak.[73] China did hoard supplies, but it was not the only cause of the lack of preparation among U.S. healthcare institutions. For example, the tariffs enacted by the Trump administration reduced U.S. stockpiling of essential medical supplies before the onset of Covid-19.[74]

This is not an argument to go back to the geopolitically naive era of unfettered globalization, but an argument that economic interdependence creates special challenges that U.S. administrations during the Cold War did not have to consider. A "win" against China is not guaranteed to be an unambiguous win for the United States, and the costs of trying to achieve that win can be far costlier than those associated with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Even the Cold War Was Not All About Confrontation

It is also important to note that the actual Cold War was far more nuanced than many of the current Cold Warriors remember. Indeed, the United States pursued a version of "managed competition" with the Soviet Union for much of the Cold War. Its policy toward Moscow was a mixture of détente and confrontation, and the United States and the Soviet Union actively collaborated with each other in areas that were deemed as benefiting both countries.[75] While many China hawks no doubt oppose continuing academic collaborations with China, it is important to point out that even in the immediate aftermath of Sputnik, the Soviet Union and the United States maintained collaborative efforts. The 1958 Lacy-Zarubin Agreement, a cultural exchange accord, facilitated the movement and collaboration of students and scholars between the two nations. Additionally, during the 1960s and 1970s, the two countries cooperated on the smallpox eradication project under the auspices of the World Health Organization, a project that provided enduring benefits to humanity.[76]

The two ends of the policy spectrum—unfettered collaboration and globalization on the one hand and the decoupling of all the ties with the PRC on the other—are easy options, but a responsible policy course that recognizes the complex reality of interdependence between the two countries is one that mitigates risks while striving to retain the upside of that interdependence. It is hard and does not make for good bumper stickers, but it is the only responsible policy course.

Here, it is possible to look to the Cold War and how the United States and Soviet Union managed collaboration in science and technology. One suggestion is to adopt a more structured and organized approach, akin to the joint smallpox project during the Cold War, where both governments mutually agreed on and supervised topics and research areas. In this geopolitical climate, collaboration must ensure the safety of both nations and participating researchers. This curated method will inevitably result in some loss of autonomy and research scale, and while it may not be the preferred approach, it is a necessary and viable alternative in these times of geopolitical tension and distrust.[77]

In the area of capital investments, the United States can take a page from how China has managed its own globalization process. The United States utilizes tariffs to restrict goods from China, a strategy that, if executed correctly, can benefit American interests. The current approach to Chinese capital inflows tends to recognize the complexity of the issue but then simplifies it to a single solution—restriction. The United States should leverage the benefits of Chinese capital inflows while mitigating the drawbacks. The United States can establish special procedures and processes dedicated to vetting and regulating Chinese investments. For instance, Congress could pass a law mandating that Chinese investments in the United States have to have American joint venture partners, or that subjects Chinese operations in the United States to a higher level and broader range of scrutiny than investments from other countries. The rise of China and the numerous challenges it poses to the United States necessitate a dedicated policy and regulatory framework, rather than adhering to the United States' usual non-discriminatory most favored nation (MFN) approach.

A Balanced Lesson from the Cold War

China's shift toward autocracy, reversal of globalization, market reforms, and belligerent geopolitical posture have all been deeply troubling developments, and the United States should harbor no illusions about Xi Jinping and his policy agenda. That said, it is important to recognize that the China of today is not the Soviet Union of the Cold War era. China is a globally connected economy in a way the Soviet Union never was, and it remains a vital economy that is important to the United States and the rest of the world. The flows of financial resources, human capital exchanges, and research collaborations have been beneficial to both countries.

The United States must confront China where the geopolitical and economic interests of the two countries collide, but it must categorically reject a strategy based solely on confrontation. Instead, the United States should seek creative and proactive ways to compete and collaborate with China, balancing the relationship to produce benefits while managing risks. The world is a complex place, requiring a nuanced approach. To espouse a policy based on toppling the Chinese regime runs the risk of turning China, an economic competitor and geopolitical rival, into an outright enemy.

It was the deft management of the Cold War–a combination of the willingness of President John F. Kennedy to reach a compromise with the Soviet Union to resolve the Cuban Missile Crisis, the détente policy of President Richard Nixon, and President Reagan's challenge to the Soviet autocracy–that cumulatively contributed to an outcome in which the Cold War ended in peace rather than in nuclear Armageddon. In drawing a lesson from the Cold War, the United States should make sure to draw the right one.

A “Vision of Victory” Is Unnecessary and Undesirable

By Bilahari Kausikan
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The United States’ relationship with China cannot be separated from broader historical processes. Professor Michael J. Green has pointed out that, since the eighteenth century, the central theme of the United States’ strategy toward the Asia-Pacific has been that it “will not tolerate any other power establishing exclusive hegemonic control over Asia or the Pacific.” To this end, the United States has “overcome bids for regional hegemony in Asia from the European powers, Imperial Japan, and Soviet communism.”[78] The current competition with China is only the latest iteration. After more than two centuries of application, the United States’ current focus on avoiding exclusive control by China remains both necessary and desirable; no alternative “vision of victory” presented rivals current policy.

Though critics may disagree, they also provide valuable reminders of what is too often overlooked or downplayed: China is a Leninist state ruled by a vanguard party that demands a monopoly of power.[79] Moreover, the flaw in many of these Cold War 2.0 arguments lies in their underlying assumption: that the current U.S.-China relationship mirrors the twentieth-century U.S.-Soviet Cold War. While there are superficial similarities between the current U.S.-China and former U.S.-Soviet competitions, this is to be expected in a relationship between two great powers. The real problem with the Cold War analogy is that it confuses the epiphenomenal with the essential and is, therefore, fundamentally misleading.

The United States and the Soviet Union’s connections were tangential as each led a discrete system, with only superficial economic connections. The Cold War was a war of ideas, an existential struggle between systems, between differing views on the fundamental ordering of society. At its core, the U.S.-Soviet relationship was a competition to determine the best way of organizing modern industrial society. Once the Soviet Union collapsed, the issue was settled.

The U.S.-China relationship is fundamentally different because their connections are very real and deep. The relationship rests on mutual interdependence and, consequently, mutual vulnerability. Unlike during the Cold War, almost all twenty-first-century economies are now mixed and differ only in the balance between the planned (which the United States and others in the West prefer to call “regulated”) and market elements. By contrast to the twentieth century, with its clear divides and limited interdependence, the twenty-first century is a global century, its economies and societies deeply interconnected.

The United States and China are the two most important nodes in this global system woven together by a global web of supply chains whose scope, density, and complexity have never before been seen.

The United States and China are both uncomfortable because their interdependence exposes their mutual vulnerabilities. Each is trying to mitigate its risks—Washington by denying China critical technologies and forcing supply-chain diversification and Beijing by promoting technological self-reliance and domestic-consumption-driven growth. Neither approach is likely to succeed, at least not to the extent their advocates may hope.

The global system is under pressure. But barring a catastrophic U.S.-China war, it is highly improbable that the incredibly dense and complex web of supply chains binding the United States and China (and others) will—or can be made to—bifurcate into two separate systems. Even within particular high-technology domains—the only area where such a divide is conceivable—it would be, at most, only partial.

The Asia-Pacific is the epicenter of U.S.-China competition. It is also the location of some of the most important nodes of the global web. It is also the region where the interconnections are most difficult to disentangle. Like it or not, the United States and China must continue to compete within the single system in which they and the rest of the world are inextricably entangled.

Cold War 2.0 advocates often see the end point of U.S.-China competition as regime change—“a China that is able to chart its own course free from communist dictatorship,” as one advocate put it.[80] Such an understanding echoes George Kennan’s prediction that patient containment would eventually lead to “either the break-up or a gradual mellowing of Soviet power,” although most contemporary advocates of regime change in China seem less patient.[81]

But the Soviet Union was containable because it pursued self-containment through autarchy; the regime in essence contained itself. The same cannot be said for China, which is so vital a node in the global system and its economy so intertwined with the world that the United States might as well try to contain itself. Even with the demographic and other structural weaknesses now evident, the Chinese system is more economically viable and more resilient than the Soviet economy ever was, even at its peak. Chinese growth will slow, but China will not collapse.

The dynamics of competition *within* a system are fundamentally different from the dynamics of the Cold War U.S.-Soviet competition *between* systems. Though dangerous The U.S.-China competition is not an existential struggle between two systems, each seeking to replace the other, but rather a struggle between two powers seeking to control the one system. Today, no one can seriously hope (or fear) that communism or the planned economy could replace capitalism or the market. Nor is it likely that U.S.-China competition will end in any clear-cut dénouement as did U.S.-Soviet competition.

The United States and China compete by trying to use the complex interdependencies of their relationship to gain an advantage within a system from which they and the rest of the world have benefitted. And, in a crucial difference from the Cold War, both the United States and China seek to do this without irrevocably damaging the system itself. This is very different from one system trying to replace the other; it is also not clear that either can gain a decisive advantage without risking serious damage to themselves, something the United States largely accomplished in the Cold War.

This underscores a fundamental reality: competition and the possibility of conflict are intrinsic characteristics of international relations among sovereign states. It is thus a mistake to conceive of any international order as necessarily based on consensus. More often than not in world history, it was the competition between major powers, and the efforts to minimize the risks of competition, that constituted the only "order" that existed.

This was certainly the case for the 40 years after the end of World War II. Only within the short and historically exceptional period after the Berlin Wall came down and the Soviet Union imploded was this central reality masked by the overwhelming dominance of the United States, which had created the illusion that there was only one vision of order.

That brief period was beneficial to most countries, including China, but that does not make it any less exceptional. Though the United States is not in the absolute decline that China likes to portray, the relativities of power have irrevocably changed. The United States will never again be as dominant as it was in the immediate post-Cold War period. The world have returned to normalcy, where competition and the possibility of conflict drive international relations.

Viewed within the *longue durée* of world history, the end of the Cold War was just another geopolitical event, albeit a momentous one. It is foolish to invest a single geopolitical event with universal significance. Although the most extreme versions of investing an event with such widespread significance as the "end of history" are no longer fashionable, their lingering shadow underlies the idea that some "vision of victory" is needed for competition with China.

The realization that China's views of the post-Cold War international order were not identical to those of the West—despite being one of its main beneficiaries—seemed shockingly unnatural to some analysts. Responses by some Cold War 2.0 advocates seem overblown, with aggressiveness concealing a loss of confidence that is close to panic. But it is not just China whose views differ from the West. Many U.S. partners and friends in the Asia-Pacific also have their own interpretations of the current rules-based order—across the region, the same words do not necessarily hold the same meaning. Singapore, for example, is a staunch supporter of what it too calls a rules-based order but is much more committed to the economic rules than to the belief that certain political ideas claimed to be "universal rights," give other countries the right to interfere in another's internal affairs. It is a Western conceit that U.S.—or Western—definitions and interpretations of rules are or should be the norm.

Heightened U.S.-China competition was in some measure due to the disenchantment after the hope that economic reform in China would lead to at least some political reform, and that this would then modify China's behavior, proved illusionary. When political reform did not follow economic reform, some of China's strategic choices—entirely logical from the Leninist state's viewpoint—aroused something almost akin to a sense of betrayal among some observers. Self-delusion contaminated the Western idea of China after Deng Xiaoping's reforms; this was based on a misunderstanding of why such states reform. The purpose of reform—any reform—in a Leninist system is always to strengthen the vanguard party and to perpetuate its rule, a fact that Xi Jinping has now made impossible to ignore. The United States must dispel its illusions to compete.

With the orthodox justification of class struggle no longer credible, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), to legitimate its monopoly of power, now relies on a highly nationalist—and revanchist—narrative of Chinese humiliation, rejuvenation, and anticipated achievement of the "China Dream" under its leadership. This narrative drives assertive Chinese behavior in the Himalayas, the East and South China Seas, and Taiwan. It infuses Chinese foreign policy with a strong sense of entitlement and makes compromise difficult, except as a tactical expedient. With this understanding, Chinese actions become more intelligible. After all, if they are only reclaiming what is rightfully theirs and that was stolen when the country was weak—as their revanchist narrative lays out—why should China compromise? Moreover, from the CCP's perspective, how can they do so without looking weak to their own people?

Lacking a credible alternative, the CCP cannot abandon its current legitimating narrative. The regime knows that it cannot rule by coercion alone, and preservation of its rule and its monopoly on power are the most vital of the CCP's core interests. There is no real threat to CCP rule, and it is not unreasonable to assume that the general Chinese population whose lives have undoubtedly improved under its leadership are not dissatisfied with its rule. However, the CCP's demand for absolute control makes it continually insecure. As China faces a future of uninspiring growth, to bolster its authority the CCP may be tempted to act out its legitimating narrative even more aggressively, possibly in the East and South China Seas or against Taiwan, particularly it if concludes that the United States is in no mood to resist.

The United States must be prepared to manage Chinese behavior over the long term through the time-tested tools of resolute deterrence and patient diplomacy. There are no quick fixes. The United States should not assume that a China without the CCP would be easier to deal with than the current

China with it. Whatever various other countries may think of China's Leninist system, the United States cannot assume that all countries in the Asia-Pacific, including U.S. allies, would regard a regime change, even if achievable, as desirable.

Moreover, it is naïve to think that without the CCP, nationalism would fade away. Professor Yan Xuetong of Tsinghua University has warned of the dangers of the sense of superiority and over-confidence of young Chinese.[82] The CCP fears—and uses—nationalism. And its monopoly on power gives the CCP the means to control nationalism. That is not to be assumed in any other type of regime. Political dynamics in a multiparty China have the potential to stoke rather than dampen nationalism, with dangerously unpredictable consequences.

Trying to shoehorn U.S.-China relations into simplistic frameworks such as "democracy versus authoritarianism" only complicates the management of competition and evokes as much resistance as support. Most countries in the Asia-Pacific, including U.S. allies, do not regard every aspect of U.S. democracy with unqualified admiration, nor do they recoil with horror from all aspects of Chinese authoritarianism. With so many disparate views, it would be well-nigh impossible to achieve regional consensus on any definition of victory.

China's leaders are rational actors, not gamblers. They will certainly not roll the dice with CCP rule, which is what a war with the United States would amount to. Nuclear deterrence kept the "long peace" between the United States and the Soviet Union.[83] The risk of conflict is never entirely absent from international relations. Still, nuclear deterrence makes a war by design—where China or the United States use war as an instrument of policy against the other—highly improbable. Instead, the real risk is conflict by miscalculation or an accident getting out of hand. Although such risks cannot be entirely eliminated, they can be managed and minimized through deterrence and diplomacy.

Composing oneself for the long-term management of an issue with little prospect of any clear resolution is not an attitude that sits naturally with most Americans. However, accepting a different goal—the prevention of exclusive hegemonic control of the Asia-Pacific, as identified by Michael Green—has the potential to make the situation more acceptable across and within the U.S. and its allies.[84] Moreover, this goal—the aim of U.S. policy in the Asia-Pacific for the last two centuries—has largely already been achieved. Insofar as the CCP's "China Dream" implies the restoration of a real or imagined regional hierarchy with China at its apex, Beijing cannot succeed.

China's size, proximity, and strategic weight will always give Beijing significant influence in the region. But these very same factors have also aroused resistance in all but a handful of countries. Within today's Asia-Pacific region, there is a better—if not always publicly acknowledged—appreciation of the irreplaceable U.S. role in maintaining equilibrium. To be sure, no country, including U.S. allies, will ever foreswear dealing with Beijing. The U.S. will have to share the Asia-Pacific space as countries seek to maximize strategic flexibility by pursuing omnidirectional foreign policies.

Concerns about Chinese behavior have revitalized bilateral U.S. alliances with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines, with only Thailand still somewhat ambivalent. It has led to the formation of the Quad, AUKUS, and security cooperation between the United States, South Korea, and Japan, between Manila and Tokyo, between Australia and Indonesia, and between Japan and India, among others. Japan has finally and decisively abandoned its postwar Yoshida Doctrine and adopted a proactive security role. Vietnam is putting aside old enmities to improve defense ties with the United States, as are traditionally non-aligned India and Indonesia. No member country of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is going to accept an exclusive relationship with China. Laos and Cambodia are partial exceptions but strategically, they are of little consequence. Overall, China is not in a favorable geopolitical position.

As China modernizes its nuclear forces and improves its second-strike capabilities, the strength of U.S. extended deterrence in the Asia-Pacific will inevitably be questioned. Will San Francisco or Los Angeles be sacrificed to save Tokyo or Seoul? Japanese or South Koreans are unlikely to assume that the answer will be positive. It is a matter of when not whether Japan and South Korea will acquire nuclear deterrents within the U.S. alliance system, just as Britain and France did in Europe decades ago. For Tokyo and Seoul, this will be politically very difficult. But however reluctantly, the logic of their situation will inexorably lead them in that direction. The alternative is the loosening of their alliances with the United States and their eventual subordination to China.

Subordination would force such a fundamental redefinition of Japanese and South Korean national identities that the nuclear option will be the less traumatic one. Independent nuclear deterrents will keep Tokyo and Seoul within America’s orbit. With India, Pakistan, Russia, and North Korea also in the equation, an octagonal balance of mutually assured destruction will freeze the Asia-Pacific into a multipolar configuration, preventing hegemonic domination by China and thereby forcing the CCP to moderate its dreams of hierarchy.

Such an outcome is not against U.S. interests. Even if the journey there may be fraught, the end result–which will be to the benefit, not only of the United States, but also to the global economy–will be a stable Asia-Pacific. The essential U.S. role is to manage the transition to such an Asia-Pacific. There is no reason for hasty or panicked responses.

Beyond De-Risking: Focus on Systemic Success

By Scott Kennedy
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A Superficial Consensus

One of the most common refrains in Washington today is the claim of a deep consensus on China policy. Republicans and Democrats may disagree on almost everything else, but they are united in their assessment that China is increasingly authoritarian at home and in violation of its international commitments abroad. As a result, the argument goes, the United States must emphatically push back on security and economic issues, with both becoming increasingly intertwined. The clearest evidence of this consensus, so the story goes, is that the Biden administration has continued, and even extended, many of the trade and technology restrictions first imposed by the Trump administration.

But this alignment is not as deep as it first appears. It is held together artificially, as with a horse's blinker hood, by a focus on day-to-day developments, the consideration and adoption of tactical moves, an effort to avoid steps that would invite domestic political attacks, and a preference for policies that score political points. While proponents of this consensus focus on the short term, however, China policy has lacked clear and measurable long-term goals, and little effort has gone into evaluating the extent to which recent policies have actually been effective in achieving their stated aims.

There has been a quiet countertrend, with analysts constructively pressing for a turn toward addressing unresolved issues. A central question, around which this volume revolves, concerns identifying the ultimate goals that the United States should set in order to define the success of its China policy; possibilities include the orientation of China's political system, the tenor of the U.S.-China relationship, and China's international behavior. The United States should not make having China be a multiparty democracy a policy goal. Instead, attention should go to the two other kinds of end states—the U.S.-China relationship and China's actions abroad. Some effort should be made to achieve a relatively stable bilateral relationship, though such a goal is highly conditional and not paramount. Instead, the most important goal of the United States' China policy should be directed at shaping Chinese behavior—specifically, limiting its destructive actions and facilitating constructive behavior—with an eye intentionally toward both the short and long term.

To explain the reasoning behind this position, this essay first provides a brief overview of the alternative approaches the United States has taken toward China over the past five decades and the key assumptions and goals of each strategy. It then provides succinct answers to key questions about China's trajectory, the dynamics of the U.S.-China relationship, and the United States' broader foreign policy goals, all of which are relevant for setting the primary goal for China policy. The essay concludes by suggesting how U.S. policy should be adjusted with the arrival of a new administration.

Alternative Strategies to Date

Since the path toward normalization commenced in the early 1970s, the United States has adopted four distinct strategies toward China (see Figure 1). The approaches have differed on whether they have seen the U.S.-China relationship as essentially cooperative or competitive and over what kind of tactics they have thought would be most effective in achieving their goals. However, surprisingly, all four have shared one characteristic in common: none has been aimed at turning China into a multiparty democracy.

Figure 1: U.S. Strategies toward China since 1972

		PRIMARY POSTURE TOWARD CHINA	
		Cooperative	**Competitive**
TACTICAL APPROACH	**Patience and Institutions**	**1. Engagement** (Integration) Reagan, Clinton, Bush-43, Obama	**3. Systemic Competition** (Contain and de-risk) Biden
	Impatience and Unilateralism	**2. Detente** (Balance of power) Nixon, Carter, Bush-41	**4. Confrontation** (Contain and decouple) Trump

It is widely recognized that regime type was a nonissue for the original opening to China. Instead, in the 1970s, during the latter part of the Cold War, Presidents Nixon and Carter were primarily focused on drawing China nearer to the United States and, consequently, away from the Soviet Union. A decade later, the administration of George H. W. Bush clearly discounted the relevance of China's authoritarian system. Instead, motivated to keep relations stable as part of a broader realist view of maintaining a balance of power in international politics, they argued against heavily sanctioning China following the June 4 massacre in Tiananmen Square.

Less well-known is that those administrations that pursued a strategy of engagement were also not motivated to make turning China into a democracy a policy goal. Some analysts have argued that advocates of engagement believed that China's democratization would naturally emerge from greater economic connectivity between the United States and China, what James Mann called "the soothing scenario."[85] Given the wave of democratization that occurred among former Soviet republics and in Central Europe, the existence of senior Chinese elites who favored at least some sort of political pluralism, and the emergence of the private sector in China, it would not have been outlandish at the time to make this connection.[86] Nevertheless, promoting China's political change was never a central motivation of any administration pursuing engagement. In fact, although Anthony Lake, President Clinton's first national security adviser, put forward the idea of using trade to expand the number of market democracies, this idea was never translated into policy.[87] And although President Clinton said on at least one occasion that China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) could generate pressures for political pluralization, analysts who have carefully reviewed the record convincingly argue that democratization was not a priority of the Clinton or George W. Bush administrations, or of congressional advocates for China's WTO entry; the issue was mentioned for domestic political purposes. China experts were, and have remained, skeptical that greater trade would result in China's democratization.[88] Instead, the key arguments for WTO entry (or more accurately, for providing China permanent normal trade relations) have revolved around promoting the marketization of China's economy and the consequent commercial benefits for the United States and others.[89]

Subsequently, the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations also did not focus on China's political regime as a target of policy. All assumed that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was ensconced in power and that it would be impossible for the United States, alone or in concert with others, to remove it, and that even an attempt to do so would be highly counterproductive to the United States' national interests. And so, if Washington were to now make the replacement of the CCP regime by a multiparty democracy a preferred end state of its China policy, it would be breaking entirely with the precedent of every other previous administration.

Previous administrations have enacted their China policies—and thereby revealed their desired end states—by pursuing a certain kind of relationship with China and by trying to encourage and discourage certain kinds of Chinese behavior. Those that pursued engagement were not aiming to induce regime change, but instead to integrate China into the liberal international rules-based order as a way to induce marketization of its economy at home and less threatening behavior on both the economic and security fronts abroad. This patient approach was always combined with deterrence on security issues, especially with regard to Taiwan, and some restrictions around sharing the most advanced technologies. This was aptly described by some in the 1980s and 1990s as a strategy of "entanglement" or "constrainment."[90] By the mid-2000s, as China became more powerful and more active in global governance, the George W. Bush administration went one step further and tried to induce China to become a "responsible stakeholder" who would act in accordance with international norms across economic, security, and human rights spheres.[91] The final attempt to use integration to induce Chinese behavior more aligned with international norms was the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Although China was not an original negotiating party, in the back of many minds was the desire to create a new agreement with higher standards that China would have to meet in order to maintain extensive commercial ties with its neighbors and advanced economies. But this effort was stillborn when the Trump administration withdrew on the first day of its administration, having an effect similar to that of the United States' decision against joining the League of Nations almost a century earlier.

The Trump and Biden administrations both abandoned pursuing a relationship defined by cooperation with China and neither was optimistic that the United States could induce Chinese behavior consonant with U.S. interests. As will be discussed below, this is mainly the result of their assessment of China's more problematic policy direction under CCP general secretary Xi Jinping. Neither administration sought regime change, but rather both have used alternative approaches against what they have determined is a strategic competitor. Like the Nixon, Carter, and George H. W. Bush administrations, the Trump administration saw the relationship entirely in terms of relative power and was not motivated by a desire to defend a broader liberal international order. By contrast, the Biden administration, akin to advocates of engagement in previous years, has made defending such an order the cornerstone of its broader foreign policy and its specific approach toward China.

Answering the Big Questions

Regardless of previous administrations' strategies, determining what should be the ultimate measure of success for the United States' China policy going forward requires addressing key questions about the United States' broader foreign policy goals, China's current direction, and the factors shaping the U.S.-China relationship. In the interests of space—fully addressing each issue could be an article on its own—here is a list of the key questions and brief answers.

BROADER U.S. FOREIGN POLICY GOALS

1. **Should the United States support the rules-based liberal international order?**

   Yes. This order has been hugely beneficial to U.S. national interests and has helped facilitate peace and prosperity around the world, including in East Asia, since the end of World War II. Its successful operation should be of paramount importance to the United States. That said, to be durable and have greater legitimacy, it clearly needs to be reformed to more effectively address the challenges of inequality, the changing nature of work, rising debt, climate change, public health threats, the role of the state in the market, and the blurring lines between the economy and national security.

2. **Is it important for the United States to act in ways consistent with the principles of this order?**

   Yes. The order is both normatively attractive and materially beneficial to the United States. Regularly acting against its principles undermines the system's legitimacy, effectiveness, and value.

3. **Is the United States powerful enough to defend this order on its own?**

   No. The United States needs others to proactively and enthusiastically participate in and contribute to the governance of this system as well as to defend it against violators, including China. Without widespread buy-in, involvement, and collective defense, the system will break down and its value will dissipate. Collaborating with others under the framework of a broader order expands the United States' influence and raises its ability to deter and reassure.

CHINA'S DYNAMICS

1. **Has China's domestic and foreign policy become significantly more problematic under the leadership of Xi Jinping?**

   Yes. Although the difference is not night and day and some of the changes preceded his ascendance to power, on Xi's watch the CCP has substantially tightened up the political system, expanded party-state intervention in the economy, and pursued with more vigor economic and security policies inconsistent with the rules-based liberal international order.[92] An important implication of this conclusion is that the United States' overriding concern is not with the CCP regime per se, but rather with the policies of its current leadership. This means that if China's overall policy direction were to change, the dangers to the United States and the international order would be less severe. Significantly, there are important segments of the broader Chinese population and elites who are dissatisfied with the country's current overall direction.

2. **Are China's current overall foreign policy intentions to displace the United States as the world's dominant superpower and establish a more illiberal international order?**

   This is unclear. The language of Chinese leaders often criticizes the rules-based liberal international order and advocates for substantial reforms in line with CCP values and norms (such as the absolute sovereignty of states), but China also often praises elements of the current order (such as the United Nations and WTO), and it appears some of the more critical elements of their rhetoric are directed at a domestic audience.

3. **Is China destined to be an economic superpower?**

No. China has made huge, genuine strides in the past four decades, becoming dominant in manufacturing, prominent in many supply chains, and a leader in several high-tech sectors. However, China's economy has major structural challenges that will constrain growth, and its current economic strategy, which is rooted in pursuing technology leadership, is depressing growth due to industrial-policy waste and growing tensions with trading partners. Going forward, China could encounter a crisis, muddle through with low growth, or revive growth with a more market-oriented strategy.

U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS

1. **Is the U.S.-China rivalry simply about relative power?**

   No. It is about both relative power and different visions–liberal and illiberal–of the international order.

2. **Can the United States shape China's environment to limit negative behavior or its consequences and incentivize more constructive behavior?**

   Yes. This is possible if the United States pursues this in concert with other countries and in line with broader principles. Collective action creates higher material and reputational costs for China to act uncooperatively.

3. **Does interdependence with China only carry risks to the United States' economy and national security?**

   No. There are substantial risks, including being vulnerable to China's non-market economy, practices, and threats to economic security (e.g., technology leakage, supply-chain dependence, and economic coercion). However, there also are substantial benefits: opportunities for greater business, more rapid innovation, and accelerated commercial competitiveness; the ability to maintain global technological leadership and Chinese dependence on Western technology; possibilities to increase China's economic costs of engaging in military aggression; continued access to Chinese talent; greater ease of benchmarking Chinese capabilities; and the maintenance of lines of communication to reduce the chances of misunderstanding or a crisis.

The above answers can be boiled down to the following: China's current domestic and international trajectories are highly problematic, but they are also subject to substantial change even if the CCP remains in power. The United States' aims toward China should be viewed through the prism of a broader contest over the international order. The United States can most effectively manage relations and shape China's behavior by operating according to the norms of this rules-based order and in concert with others.

Beyond De-Risking

These insights should shape the overall goals of the United States' China policy as well as the ways Washington pursues these aims in both the short and long term.

The most important "end state" for the United States' China policy is not the nature of China's political system or simply a more powerful United States, but rather the extent to which its China policy helps strengthen a reformed rules-based liberal international order. This outcome is unlikely to be furthered by an aggressive effort to undermine the CCP's monopoly on power, which very well could lead to war or, at a minimum, an expensive waste of resources and energy that could be more effectively employed elsewhere. Conversely, the rules-based order would also not be promoted by eternal patience and the accommodation of China's preferences about human rights, economic governance, sovereignty claims, and other issues in the name of maintaining friendly relations.

Instead of either extreme, the United States should pursue a middle path of actively managing relations with China through a combination of deterrence and reassurance across issue areas, both on its own and in concert with others. In the short term, the goal would be to limit destructive Chinese behavior, or at least its consequences, and promote its constructive behavior where possible.

The approach outlined here is likely closer in spirit and overall approach to the Biden administration's strategy of the past three years than that of the Trump administration's strategy before it. There is no doubt that adopting de-risking measures to address economic security risks has been and will continue to be necessary. Yet such steps—such as export controls, investment screening, and onshoring—need to be judicious, coordinated with other economies, and done in a manner consistent with the rules-based order. And where there are no rules or the rules are outdated, the United States must pursue revising the international system with a sense of urgency in order to avoid a race to the bottom. If the United States overly emphasizes defensive restrictions, it is likely to find itself with insufficient support to achieve its goals. Similarly, unconstrained industrial policy would likely result in massive waste, slower growth, less innovation, and weaker global competitiveness. Finally, the United States needs to avoid targeted de-risking measures escalating into a broader decoupling that would result in a bifurcated or fragmented global economy. Such an outcome would be economically costly to U.S. companies, workers, and consumers, while also denying the United States the benefits of maintaining commercial ties with China, as outlined above.

Pursuing specific policies aligned with the principles of the broader order on a day-to-day basis is meant to provide long-term benefits in two ways. The first is simply through the gradual advancement of building and strengthening a successful rules-based order. The second is by maintaining an opportunity for China to eventually choose a path more consistent with this order. From today's vantage point and with the current geometry of power in China, this second goal seems highly unlikely. However, given the prevalence of internal disquietude because of the trajectory of the country's current political, economic, and foreign policies, an eventual tack back in the other direction is not out of the question. Hence, even if ties are highly constrained and defined largely by rivalry, maintaining civil ties and avoiding conflict would help "keep the pilot light on" for future generations of potential reformers.[93] Similarly, the United States can only keep an open seat at the table for a future China if the United States continues to defend and nurture this system.

Conclusion

There is no consensus on the goals and approach of the China policy outlined here. That is reflected in disagreements about China's trajectory, analyses of U.S.-China relations, and conflicting views about the international system. The final leg of this triangle may be the weakest given the chorus of criticisms from the left and right, alternatively, about globalization, multilateralism, and immigration. Yet this is a debate that needs to occur, with an evaluation of the costs and benefits of U.S. policies to date and a weighing of the strengths and weaknesses of various options going forward.

At the same time, if one takes a historical view, the various policy approaches adopted over the past half-century, even if different, need not be seen as necessarily in inexorable conflict. Instead, one could argue that different times call for different strategies. There was a powerful logic in normalizing relations in order to counter the Soviet Union, but such a rationale had a finite life once the Soviet Union waned and then disappeared. Using engagement to facilitate integration did yield substantial value for a decade or more, on net benefiting the U.S. economy and restraining some of China's most aggressive impulses. But as China became more powerful, the U.S. economy faltered, and faith in the underlying order waned, China shifted in a different, more contentious direction, pulling the United States to adjust accordingly. As Susan Shirk aptly describes, China "overreached," and the United States then "overreacted."[94] It is now time for Washington to course correct again, from "de-risking" to "re-building," not just the bilateral relationship, but the broader international order.

An Indian View on U.S.-China Strategic Competition

By Manoj Kewalramani

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Over the last few years, Indian policymakers, scholars, and strategic affairs analysts have been grappling to contextualize the changes in international affairs and to understand what they mean for India's interests. Some have contended that the world has entered a new state of disorder; unfortunately, the prescriptive utility of this analysis is extremely limited.[95] Others argue that there is a definite, if gradual, shift toward a new Cold War-style architecture.[96] Such an outcome is indeed a possibility and, moreover, is rather seductive, for it embodies the comfort of familiarity. Yet it underplays the peculiarities of present times. Finally, there are those who maintain that the world is between orders—that it is adrift, somewhere between bipolarity and classical multipolarity.[97] Though this third framework accounts for the prevailing uncertainties and advises caution, it does not capture the opportunities that may be emerging.

Constituents of the New Order

The last decade has witnessed the gradual reemergence of great power competition—between the United States and China. Assessed on broad metrics of power, and though there are significant differences between them, these two countries are the dominant global actors.[98] Together, the

United States and China account for over 42 percent of global GDP and over half of global defense spending.[99] Moreover, increasingly, the prism of competition appears to be baked into their respective strategic worldviews.[100]

That said, nearly three decades of economic globalization have built deep linkages between Chinese and U.S. economic and science and technology ecosystems. An unprecedented web of interconnected supply chains now powers the global economy. The Chinese economy is central to these networks and the health of the world economy. Shattering these bonds, therefore, would come at significant costs. The recent shift in discourse—away from decoupling to de-risking in the United States and from self-reliance to high-standard opening up in China—acknowledges that reality. In addition, while the current U.S.-China competition does exhibit an ideological hue, both sides have significant stakes in the existing international institutional architecture. Undoubtedly, both China and the United States have their own set of grievances with this architecture and are engaging in a certain degree of revisionism. However, neither appears to be driven by a revolutionary zeal to upend the UN-centered system. More importantly, even if revolution were an ambition for either, both are evidently inhibited by the constraints of their resources, capacities, domestic politics, and global appeal.

The complex interdependencies between and limitations of the United States and China have generated space for and shaped the decisionmaking of countries like India. In essence, the world appears to be in a state wherein great powers are seeking to compete by investing in domestic capacity, constraining and delegitimizing each other's actions, and expanding their respective influences. Middle powers such as India, meanwhile, are pursuing capability enhancement, autonomy of action, and enhanced bargaining power.

The View from Delhi

In his book, published on the eve of India's 2024 parliamentary elections, S. Jaishankar, India's external affairs minister, described the current international order as fragile and undergoing a "transition," with sharpening great power competition enhancing stress factors across multiple domains.[101] This, he argued, is likely to result in selective disengagement in certain areas of contention. Nevertheless, given the impacts of decades of economic globalization and the transnational nature of many challenges (e.g., climate change), interdependence and interconnectedness were likely to remain key features of the world order. Consequently, the challenge for countries like India was to identify opportunities and boost national capabilities, particularly in core and sensitive areas. This, Jaishankar wrote, was the key to ensuring strategic autonomy.

Implicit in this analysis is an acknowledgment that distant developments increasingly have a direct bearing on Indian interests. The strategic impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the global balance of power, along with the war's second-order effects on global finance and food and energy supply chains is a case in point. At the same time, Jaishankar's analysis evidences India's desire to engage more actively in mitigating these challenges and shaping a favorable external environment. This shift is a product of not only India's expanding interests but also the country's greater capacity and willingness to pursue them. In other words, if India's earlier non-alignment was the product of a desire to not choose between competing blocs, multi-alignment, as the current strategy has been termed, is premised on a desire to expand options and choices. The objective of this strategy is to eventually fashion a multipolar world order, with India being a key pole. Indian strategic thought has long engendered a sense of manifest destiny regarding the country's global role, and multipolarity in Asia, of course, is a prerequisite to achieve that.

The logical corollary to this line of thought is that neither extreme—a Cold War-style rivalry between China and the United States nor a coexistence that results in U.S. acquiescence of Chinese primacy in Asia—serves India's interests. The former scenario narrows India's options and potentially places it on a volatile frontline. The latter fundamentally alters Asia's balance of power adversely for India. That said, Indian policymakers and analysts do not tend to view the U.S.-China relationship as a zero-sum game. Rather, they believe that the relationship exhibits strands of cooperation—albeit deeply strained—and of contention. India's engagement with both great powers, therefore, is primarily rooted in pragmatism, prioritizing the country's strategic interests, while being mindful of factors like geography, values, and legacy. Issue-based tents rather than ideological camps is what India would prefer.

With that in mind, a certain amount of friction between the United States and China on issues of security, values, trade, and technology is essential to opening up new formulations and dimensions of cooperation. Given the current state of affairs, fluidity is where India believes it can thrive. Of course, fluidity is not necessarily a sustainable state, nor is it desirable for the long term; it comes with significant challenges. By its very nature, fluidity engenders uncertainty. The occurrence of a black swan event, such as hostilities in the South China Sea or over Taiwan, can quickly erode the window of opportunity for middle powers and inhibit maneuverability. Such an event would also result in higher costs for accessing capital, markets, commodities, and technologies. Consequently, the transition from fluidity to multipolarity necessitates prompt deal-making to enhance developmental outcomes, build interdependencies based on shared interests and values, and rapidly expand national capabilities and power.

Interests and Strategic Empathy

The India-U.S. relationship has grown by leaps and bounds over the past 25 years. This is a product of a convergence of strategic interests and sustained diplomatic engagement. Despite raucous public debates, there is an evident appreciation of the significance of a close partnership with the United States among the political elite in India. Economic ties with the United States are deeply consequential for India, particularly regarding access to technology, skills, capital, and markets. More significantly, the persistence of U.S. power in Asia is a necessary condition for India to ensure that the external environment remains conducive to its security and developmental goals.

To this end, over the past 25 years, successive governments in New Delhi have pursued a deeper strategic partnership with Washington. Economically, the United States is among India's largest trading partners. Security ties have also deepened, picking up pace after the signing of foundational defense agreements and the 2016 designation of India as a "Major Defense Partner." The United

States' defense trade with India has expanded from near zero in 2008 to over $20 billion in 2020.[102] Additionally, the two countries are also more deeply cooperating in the exchange and development of critical and emerging technologies.[103] Finally, there has been greater diplomatic and intelligence engagement across a range of issues. In particular, the United States has played a key role in augmenting India's capabilities to counter domestic threats, particularly through intelligence and defense cooperation.

Importantly, both sides appear to view the relationship as strategically symbiotic, rather than as a transactional arrangement. From a U.S. perspective, India's growing market, skilled talent pool, democratic system, and shared normative vision for the world order make it an attractive partner. This has acquired greater salience recently, particularly given the rise of China and the United States' domestic debates over recalibrating its own interests and commitments abroad. Washington's desire to pursue more cost-effective means of influence, primarily by seeking an offshore balancing role and greater burden-sharing from allies and partners to achieve global objectives, also makes India an appealing partner. Consequently, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy acknowledges that a strong India is critical to further the United States' vision of "freedom and openness" by expanding "autonomy and options" for regional actors.[104] In other words, the United States views India's growing power in Asia as critical to blunting the coercive edge of Chinese power. This is a goal that New Delhi shares, as evident by its engagement in the Quad, its support for AUKUS, and its public criticism of Chinese policy in the South China Sea.

Both the United States and India, thus far, have demonstrated foresight and not let specific divergences in interests or narrow differences over values undermine their strategic congruence. The management of friction over India's ties with Russia and its importation of Russian energy supplies, along with differences with the United States over human rights and democracy in India, are noteworthy examples. However, given the challenges inherent to fluidity, as discussed earlier, lines of communication absolutely must remain open and be utilized frequently. This is likely to remain a challenging endeavor. Maintaining strategic empathy requires constant engagement, clarification of expectations and limitations, and respect for each other's political concerns. It also requires appreciating that the daily manifestations of shared values–such as respect for freedom and individual liberty, the sanctity of constitutionalism and rule of law, transparency in governance, inclusion, pluralism, and human rights–derive from social and national contexts. That, however, does not mean that their manifestations must be constrained by those contexts.

Quest for a Modus Vivendi

Beijing has long believed that a shared antipathy toward its rise is the fundamental driver of U.S.-India proximity. Chinese diplomats' repeated calls for New Delhi to view bilateral relations in the context of the evolving global situation underscore this.[105] China has predominantly relied on tools of coercion to shape and constrain India's options. In doing so, China has also demonstrated increased risk tolerance and willingness to use force, likely emboldened by perceptions of its own superiority in terms of the bilateral balance of power.

In fact, over the past decade, Chinese policies have shifted from being merely unaccommodating of India's interests to being clearly hostile and adversarial. This has been particularly evident in the escalation of tensions along the countries' disputed land border, China's repeated blocking of the listing of Pakistan-based terrorists on the ISIL (Da'esh) and Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee of the UN Security Council, and its refusal to acquiesce to India's membership in the Nuclear Suppliers Group. China has remained steadfast on these issues, despite repeated high-level diplomatic attempts at a thaw, particularly in 2018 and 2019. It is little surprise then that the India-China relationship is at its worst since their 1962 war. Key to this relationship are structural factors, such as the expanded interests and capacities of the two countries, the asymmetry of power between them, and the shifts in the world order as characterized by U.S.-China competition. In addition, the persistence of the boundary dispute and escalation along the Line of Actual Control have deepened political mistrust.

The ongoing standoff between Indian and Chinese forces in Eastern Ladakh is now in its fifth year, with both sides having 60,000 forward-deployed troops. Politically, dialogue has largely stalled. There has been no formal bilateral meeting between the Indian prime minister Narendra Modi and the Chinese president Xi Jinping since October 2019. Years of discord have dealt a severe blow to people-to-people relations, with people on both sides increasingly viewing the relationship through a threat prism rather than an opportunity one.[106] This is also the dominant view of the strategic affairs communities in both countries.[107]

Yet, geography as well as economic and security concerns necessitate dialogue. It is simply not possible to wish away a neighbor or perennially eschew engagement, particularly when that neighbor is one of your largest trading partners, and trade with them is critical to your own manufacturing and export ambitions. Moreover, the absolute and opportunity costs of the sustained deployment of sizable forces along a frigid and harsh boundary terrain will sooner or later begin to take their toll. New Delhi's quest, therefore, has been to arrive at a new modus vivendi with Beijing, one in which China accommodates India's core interests and aspirations. This is encapsulated in India's framework of the "three mutuals"—mutual respect, mutual sensitivity, and mutual interest.[108] Ensuring adherence to these, however, requires a significant advancement of Indian power in order to narrow the differential with China. This is akin to the proposition put forward by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken of dealing with China from a position of strength. In this endeavor for India, the United States is an indispensable partner.

Conclusion

In conclusion, from India's perspective, sustained yet contained competition between the United States and China is desirable. It is in India's interests for the United States to remain the preeminent power in a multipolar Asia. China, of course, would be part of such an order, although the balance of power would ideally have significantly constrained that country's ability to coerce regional actors or to violate rules and norms. Ensuring this outcome requires the following.

First, Washington must maintain policy continuity, regardless of domestic political changes, and ensure sustained high-level engagement with the region, despite stress in other theaters. Second, the United States must work with allies and partners to build joint capabilities with the aim of blunting Beijing's ability to coerce through threats of force. This requires action across domains including defense, economic development, resiliency in key supply chains, innovations in emerging technologies, and development of governance rules and norms based on shared values. Finally, it is inevitable that this process will generate friction; there is, in fact, a high probability of confrontation. It is, thus, imperative for Washington to engage Beijing with the aim of establishing escalation management mechanisms. Given the current circumstances, progress is likely to resemble two steps forward, one step back.

A Vision Is Not a Strategy

By James Lee

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There has long been abundant evidence that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) poses a formidable challenge to U.S. interests, whether in matters directly relating to the national security of the United States or in matters relating to the security of U.S. allies and partners.[109] But the United States would not be better served by attempting to bring about a particular outcome in its China policy: any "vision of victory" would either be too specific to be attainable or too abstract to be actionable. If such a vision were elaborated in all of its details, the United States would face the problem of lacking the policy instruments for engineering political and economic developments on the other side of the world; it is difficult enough for the United States to implement a vision for how its own polity and economy will develop, let alone in China. If, on the other hand, a vision of victory should be defined in terms of abstractions, it would necessarily be subject to a wide range of interpretations and lack clear benchmarks for measuring its progress and eventual success. Moreover, in attempting to pursue those abstractions, the United States would introduce substantial risks in its relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and with its own allies and partners.

To elaborate on this critique more fully, it is helpful to first provide a working definition of a "vision of victory" with regard to China. Judging by recent proposals along these lines, this concept can be defined as follows: to make it inconceivable that China would seek to contest U.S. primacy in international relations, especially in the Indo-Pacific. Pursuant to this end, the United States would seek some combination of degrading PRC capabilities (both military and economic) and encouraging liberal reforms within the PRC that would weaken the CCP's hold on power.[110] In this view, the United States would be able to claim victory once it became clear that China could no longer achieve its strategic and operational objectives under any contingency scenario that involved the introduction of U.S. forces and assets. This would be deterrence by denial, but on a systematic and comprehensive scale.[111] The United States would also be able to claim victory once China was transformed into a liberal state that (it is assumed) would observe more moderation and restraint in its foreign policy. The scale of these ambitions is vast—so vast, in fact, that this vision seems very much like a pipe dream.

Such a vision of victory would go beyond the strategic requirements of the challenge that the United States faces. Safeguarding U.S. national security does not require the United States to "defeat" China, but rather to deter China from taking actions that would jeopardize U.S. interests. This is a tall order, to be sure, but it considers contingencies, capabilities, operations, and tactics that are finite and concrete. Many of them, such as the range of scenarios that involve Beijing trying to change the status quo in the Taiwan Strait, have already been elaborated in public documents.[112] While some of these analyses necessarily involve a degree of speculation, any speculation is subject to the discipline of the facts on the ground: Does Beijing have the capability to launch a *fait accompli* that would enable it to seize control of Taiwan before the United States (and U.S. allies and partners) could intervene? Does the People's Liberation Army (PLA) have the requisite capabilities for launching a major amphibious operation across the strait? Does Taiwan have the resiliency needed to prevent the PLA from securing a beachhead within a matter of days? The answers to these questions may not be straightforward, but their operational and tactical dimensions are fairly well defined.

The aperture of speculation widens to unmanageable proportions once U.S. strategy is conceived of as a vision of victory. If the United States is to plan for a future "V-Day" in the Indo-Pacific, then it must take into account—and even try to influence—what happens the day before V-Day, and what happens the day before the day before V-Day, and so on. The longer the time horizon over which this vision is to unfold, the more difficult it will be to put it into practice because the variables and constraints will multiply with every passing day. The difficulty is magnified by the fact that, in contrast to victory in war, victory in peace is neither easy to see nor to define: nobody will be waving a white flag, nobody will be signing instruments of surrender, and nobody will pay reparations to the victor. Consider, for instance, the earlier definition in which China "could no longer achieve its strategic and operational objectives under any contingency scenario that involved the introduction of U.S. forces and assets." In the abstract, that is clear enough, but what does it mean in practice? How could the United States ever be certain that China would be incapable of achieving its objectives if the United States intervened? Not only would such a vision require a complete description of all potential contingencies, but it would also require the United States to have absolute confidence in the outcome of a range of hypothetical scenarios. Such confidence would be either elusive or fundamentally misguided. It is impossible to predict the outcome of a war before it starts, even if all of the available information suggests that one side has a decisive advantage.

Having a vision of victory would not help the United States secure appreciable gains, and it would introduce significant risk. If the issue at stake is taking more decisive action in the United States' China policy—by bolstering U.S. capabilities in the Indo-Pacific, for example—then it is entirely possible to rationalize and implement those policies without a vision of victory. The United States can compete more vigorously with China without defining its objective as the defeat of China. The concept of a vision of victory is neither necessary nor sufficient for prescribing policy changes that would more effectively safeguard U.S. interests. The difference is largely one of branding, and that branding could be detrimental to the United States even if the policies themselves are sound. There is a risk that if the United States declares its vision of victory, the PRC will be locked into a posture of hostility, especially if Beijing comes to believe that the United States seeks regime change.[113] Under that scenario, Beijing would likely lose all interest in engaging on issues of importance to the United States, including continuing dialogue between their military forces, halting fentanyl production and trafficking, mitigating the effects of climate change, and regulating AI.[114] As much as U.S.-China relations may have deteriorated in recent years, they could deteriorate even further, and the United States still needs some degree of cooperation from China.

It is also important to consider how U.S. allies and partners will respond. Concerns about their reactions have been raised before, though they are not always fully elaborated.[115] The Biden-Harris administration's Indo-Pacific strategy relies extensively on the United States' alliances and partnerships, and that context provides enough reason to ask whether a U.S. vision of victory would find support outside of the United States.[116] But supposing that a more unilateral strategy could be formulated, how important would it be to consider the views of allies and partners? The Cold War concept of "neutralism" offers an answer: the posture of not aligning with either of the great powers. U.S. strategy throughout the Cold War was often concerned with preventing the spread of neutralism among U.S. allies and partners. At the start of the Korean War, for example, an intelligence estimate concluded that failure by the United States to intervene in Korea would "strengthen existing widespread desire for neutrality" in Japan because it would "add force to the argument that alignment of Japan with the United States would, while inviting Soviet aggression, in no way ensure American protection of Japan against such aggression."[117] According to the estimate, neutralism would also spread in West Germany. While the United States does not currently face the prospect of a wholesale disengagement from the U.S. alliance system, it must ask itself whether its allies and partners see the United States as a strategic asset or as a strategic liability over the long term. If the United States pursues a more confrontational approach in its relations with China—even if that confrontation is circumscribed to the branding of U.S. strategy—will U.S. allies and partners see that approach as shielding them from PRC aggression, or triggering the PRC to retaliate? Bonnie Glaser has raised a similar point in the debate on strategic ambiguity and strategic clarity in the Taiwan Strait. The risks for U.S. allies and partners become even more acute under a vision of victory.[118]

One might argue that the United States could offset these risks for its allies and partners in how it implements its vision of victory. In this view, any increased risk of PRC retaliation could be compensated for by an increased U.S. defense commitment. But that kind of assurance would not be very comforting to U.S. allies and partners, who would become even more dependent on the United States for their security because of actions that the United States had taken. This development would be particularly alarming for U.S. partners, who, lacking a formal alliance treaty, would harbor doubts about the United States' willingness to intervene in their defense. Public opinion research from Taiwan, for example, has shown that there is considerable fluctuation year to year in terms of how the Taiwanese public views the credibility of the United States (defined as being "consistent in its words and actions 講信用").[119] Doubts about U.S. credibility cannot be completely addressed by declaring a policy of strategic clarity, since adopting a policy of clarity would only be a change of words.[120] Allies and partners might choose instead to distance themselves from the United States, leading to the spread of neutralism that the United States feared during the Cold War.[121]

A vision of victory has a certain appeal in terms of its simplicity and clarity. Yet this appeal, which often invokes the Cold War, can be misleading in how it interprets history, and thus lead to a poorly conceived strategy.[122] When the United States decided to intervene in the Korean War, its objective was not only to impose costs on North Korea. It was also to reassure U.S. allies that an alliance with the United States was worth more than what it cost: aligning with Washington might raise tensions with U.S. adversaries, but the promise of U.S. support was credible enough to convince those allies to choose Washington's side. A vision of victory, on the other hand, has the potential to remind U.S. allies of the risks, rather than the benefits, of an alliance with the United States.

Critics might claim that there's a logical inconsistency: if the United States' intervention in the Korean War enhanced U.S. credibility and galvanized support for alliances with the United States, why would a vision of victory with regard to China not have the same effect? The difference has to do with which side would be perceived as changing the status quo and what the nature of that status quo would be. The North Korean attack on June 25, 1950, was a brazen act of aggression in flagrant violation of the UN Charter; in President Truman's words, "The attack upon Korea makes it plain beyond all doubt that Communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations and will now use armed invasion and war."[123] The international communist movement had tried to create a new status quo in which U.S. allies and partners were potentially subject to armed attack; U.S. intervention restored the status quo ante, by defeating North Korea in war and deterring North Korea in peace. A vision of victory against China, on the other hand, would involve the United States trying to create a new status quo in how it defines its strategic objectives; and if China reacts with hostility, then the United States would be creating a condition of insecurity for its allies and partners. Adopting a vision of victory would not be a case of the United States saving the free world from communism, but rather of the United States setting itself, its allies, and its partners on a collision course with China.

A Vision of Success in the U.S.-China Rivalry: The Technological Competition

By Michael J. Mazarr

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U.S. strategy toward China is currently focused on the requirements of persistent competition rather than on a clear vision of success or end state.[124] Arguably, nowhere is that more evident than in the most important single measure of competitive advantage: the competition in basic science and frontier technologies. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has identified this domain as a critical leverage point for national power, and its strategies–ranging from massive state subsidies to intellectual property theft and forced technology transfers–to achieve leadership, or even dominance, in key technologies have caused severe strains in its relationship with the United States and others.[125] The United States has responded with a series of actions designed to sustain or recapture scientific and technological leadership–limits on high-technology exports and outbound investment, massive investments in the U.S. semiconductor and renewable energy industries, increased research and development (R&D) spending, and much more.

Few treatments of the U.S.-China technology competition, however, have addressed the question of objectives: What would count as a successful endgame for this specific contest? Developing a concept of success for such a wide-ranging and ongoing competition, while extremely difficult, is essential. Absent such a construct, the current U.S. approach risks embracing competition for its own sake and rushing down blind alleys without a clear sense of where policy will lead. The recent spate of semiconductor-oriented export controls is a perfect example. While they are based on a clear sense of the importance of cutting-edge chips, even the architects of such policies admit that their true long-term results—such as how much of a delay they will impose upon China, how Beijing's responses will reshape the future technology competition, and how the loss of markets will affect the semiconductor industry—cannot be known. The only vision of success that appears to animate these actions is a very broad idea of staying ahead of China in semiconductors.

Several studies have suggested lists of basic outcomes for the U.S.-China science and technology competition, and such lists are useful as far as they go.[126] But U.S. strategists need something more—a broader idea of what success looks like that describes how those outcomes can be produced on an enduring basis and that nests them within a larger vision of how the overall rivalry can reach a more stable and lasting equilibrium that itself can serve as an endgame.

This essay offers such a vision, based primarily on lessons from the history of prior scientific and technological revolutions. The goal is neither to assess who is winning nor to lay out a comprehensive strategy, but rather to sketch out a lasting recipe for security and competitive advantage within a larger concept of a trajectory toward an endgame for the rivalry, one that can provide a target for U.S. strategy. In the process, the essay focuses in some depth on one especially critical field of technology—artificial intelligence (AI)—and offers one especially important overarching theme: a stable outcome of the current competition has much less to do with metrics of relative standing with major rivals and instead relies much more on the fundamental national qualities which underwrite dynamism and competitive advantage. The most compelling concept of success must be built around a dynamic, effective, and innovative U.S. competitive engine in science and technology, an approach that is consistent with a program to encourage the long-term mellowing of the rivalry.

The vision of success proposed here marries this core ideal of domestic scientific and technological dynamism with two other elements. First, any successful outcome will be one in which the United States remains at the hub of the global science and technology networks of the twenty-first century. Second, success requires that the United States achieves enough national resilience to mitigate key vulnerabilities and dependencies related to science and technology, a concept that implies, at a minimum, preventing Chinese monopolies or effective dominance of essential scientific and technological fields. Current U.S. policy embraces all of these themes, to some degree. But the important insight for U.S. strategy is that these three concepts—a world-leading engine of scientific and technological progress, network power, and resilience—can provide the essential ingredients for a vision of success in scientific and technological competition.

A Rivalry for Global Economic and Technological Supremacy

The U.S.-China rivalry takes place in many domains—such as military capabilities, cultural influence, the ability to shape the international system, and battles of narratives.[127] But both sides appear to believe that the contest for leadership in a set of frontier technologies may be the most decisive struggle of all. Many analysts of scientific and technological trends agree that the nations of the world are confronting a transformational moment, with one economic-technological era giving way to another. A set of emerging technologies, including biotechnology, quantum science, advanced manufacturing, and most of AI—discussed at some length below—may be fashioning a new Industrial Revolution with even more profound implications than the last two. The great powers which master this new revolution will gain tremendous competitive advantage.

CHINA'S VIEWS OF TECHNOLOGY COMPETITION

The current Chinese leadership has come to see science and technology as the essential requirement for national competitive success. China-watcher Tanner Greer recently catalogued the numerous ways in which the senior leadership of the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) has declared, in word and deed, the priority they place on technological progress and advantage.[128] The 2024 National Peoples' Congress Work Report, for example, calls out developing China "through science and technology" as the basic avenue to economic competitiveness. As Greer and Nancy Yu put it, "The central task of the Chinese state is to build an industrial and scientific system capable of pushing humanity to new technological frontiers." They cite a 2016 PRC planning document which lays out the goal of China becoming the "leading scientific power in the world."[129] Recent statements such as these build on earlier programs for scientific and technological advantage, such as the "National Medium- and Long-Term Program for Science and Technology Development (2006-2020)," which explicitly stated its goal: "In the 21st century, China, being a large developing nation, is to accelerate its [science and technology] development and narrow down the gaps with the developed nations. To this end, the nation must make unremitting efforts for a long period of time."[130]

The recent emphasis on technology in the Chinese system has deep roots in pre-communist-era analyses of how China fell behind in the industrial age, Marxist historical materialism, and various other sources. As Greer and Yu write, many Chinese sources refer to a "hinge point in history," a transition point in economic life, and they believe that the set of emerging technologies is creating that today. A recent study entitled *National Security and the Rise and Fall of Great Powers* by a Chinese think tank also emphasizes science and technology as the leading "general law" that determines national fates.[131]

The most recent form this thinking has taken is the Chinese discussion of "new quality productive forces." This is another way of referring to a set of science and technology advances that empower national strength. As economist Arthur Kroeber writes:

> These slogans culminate a major shift in China's overall economic policy direction that has been building for two decades, and that has accelerated noticeably in the last five or so years of Xi's administration. China has now decisively moved away from the growth-maximizing orientation that prevailed from 1979 until the early 2010s, which prioritized systemic reforms to achieve as high a GDP growth rate as possible. The new economic vision prioritizes the acquisition and development of technology—especially "hard" technologies that require a large industrial and manufacturing base.[132]

In service of these general concepts, Beijing's Made in China 2025 program is designed to channel state investment into a set of 10 critical technologies with the goal of achieving relative leadership, if not global predominance.[133] With ideas of innovation chains and productive networks clearly in mind, China is investing in technology components throughout these chains.[134] In the process–and especially after recent U.S. technology export controls–Beijing has placed an increasing focus on self-reliance and indigenous production of key technologies.[135] This year's Third Plenum of the 20th Party Congress reemphasized these factors, doubling down on China's development strategy, which focuses on dominating key frontier industries to achieve "high-quality" development.[136]

China's endgame in the technology competition, then, is in one sense clear enough. There can be little doubt that Beijing aims to be the unquestioned global leader in a whole series of science- and technology-based industries, from 5G and renewable energy to electric vehicles and biotechnology. (In parallel, it is seeking dominance in less technologically cutting-edge industries such as shipbuilding.) How precisely China defines success in these terms is not clear, although in some cases, such as solar panels, it has achieved something close to a global monopoly position in manufacturing, and in 5G China was apparently seeking to position Huawei similarly as the overwhelmingly dominant global actor.[137] This position of technological overmatch would consequently provide Beijing with tremendous leverage in its broader effort to achieve global leadership.[138] China's favored end state in the technology competition therefore envisions overall supremacy in many critical fields, all of which can be employed for broader geostrategic effect.

THE UNITED STATES' APPROACH TO THE COMPETITION

Until recently, the United States' approach to the technology competition has been far less comprehensive, strategic, and nationally directed, instead relying on a more laissez-faire attitude that largely counted on the private sector to produce the necessary national scientific and technological strengths. In fact, despite earlier emphases on technology competition with Japan, until the late 2000s the United States did not even fully recognize that it was engaged in a national technology competition with China at all.[139] This began to change in the Trump administration and was fully overturned in the Biden administration, which brought a new focus to the issue.

National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan made perhaps the most elaborate statement about the contest in a 2022 speech. "Advancements in science and technology are poised to define the geopolitical landscape of the 21st century," he argued. "They will generate game-changers in health and medicine, food security, and clean energy. We'll see leap-ahead breakthroughs and new industries that drive our prosperity. And, of course, new military and intelligence capabilities that will shape our national security."[140] Sullivan laid out an ambitious goal for the U.S. strategy:

> On export controls, we have to revisit the longstanding premise of maintaining "relative" advantages over competitors in certain key technologies. We previously maintained a "sliding scale" approach that said we need to stay only a couple of generations ahead. That is not the strategic environment we are in today. Given the foundational nature of certain technologies, such as advanced logic and memory chips, we must maintain as large of a lead as possible.[141]

A later speech by Secretary of State Antony Blinken expanded on the significance of the technology competition. He identified six technologies as core to the U.S. competitive strategy: "microelectronics, advanced computing and quantum technologies, artificial intelligence, biotechnology and biomanufacturing, advanced telecommunications, and clean energy technologies." Blinken introduced a key principle of U.S. strategy—not an isolating "digital sovereignty" as China has proposed, but rather engaging in "digital solidarity" with friends and allies.[142]

The U.S. response to China's goals has taken shape gradually and incrementally. At least three major tools have so far been in evidence. First, the Biden administration has invested large sums in catalyzing certain domestic U.S. technology industries—most notably semiconductors and renewable energy—in a bid to match selected elements of China's industrial policy. Second, the United States has sought to set back efforts of specific Chinese firms to achieve dominance (or at least parity) in critical domains. Major examples of this strategy include sanctions against the Chinese firms ZTE and Huawei, targeted outbound investment restrictions, efforts to convince other countries to spurn Chinese firms and investment, and semiconductor export limits. (In the process, the United States has sought to identify chokepoints or "chokeholds," specific firms or dependencies that U.S. policy can use to constrain China's technology development.[143])

It is not yet evident, however, if the Biden administration or other U.S. analysts and commentators have a clear idea of what this must or could all add up to. The U.S. strategy so far seems to lack a clear theory of success, and its embrace of apparently never-ending competition has the potential to lead to substantial mission creep. As one account suggests, the intensity of the U.S. competitive vision contains elements that "seek to eradicate, root and branch, China's entire ecosystem of advanced technology," which more than one observer has described as acts of economic warfare.[144] The United States has embraced an approach that at least implies a campaign to constrain China's general technological and economic advances, something that is viewed in Beijing as a generalized threat to the regime's survival.[145]

It is also not clear, however, whether the current U.S. approaches will even work in the long run. While U.S. policy might have restrained the spread of Huawei to a few key countries, for example, the firm has managed to thrive despite U.S. sanctions.[146] Whether U.S. semiconductor sanctions can provide a lasting advantage—or if they will merely prompt China to develop indigenous production years before it might otherwise have done—remains an open question. Both situations starkly illustrate the problem of sustaining a truly targeted approach to technology competition. Sanctions against individual firms or technologies do not address the larger ecosystems that support China's development. Yet going after the wider ecosystem, as a growing list of U.S. technology sanctions has sought to do, implies a completely unrestrained technology conflict.[147] China, meanwhile, is gearing up to build tools to retaliate against U.S. technology constraints. These challenges and risks are increasingly evident in what may become the centerpiece of the scientific and technological contest in years ahead—the development and, perhaps even more importantly, the practical application of the wide range of tools collectively known as AI.

THE SPECTER OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

The benefits of AI to the great powers remain a mystery. Some economic forecasts envision a massive boost to productivity and growth, while others are less optimistic.[148] If even part of the hype surrounding AI's economic and military applications proves true, this area of the technological competition may decide the U.S.-China rivalry all by itself.[149] Some analysts expect further developments in AI—including, perhaps, the achievement of artificial general intelligence, the moment when an AI model can solve a broad range of problems and operate autonomously through many stages of self-determined action in ways that vastly outpace human consciousness—to augment national power in almost magical ways.

If AI has such effects, whoever gets to critical thresholds first, or whoever develops a massive lead in a more gradual and emergent process, will enjoy a competitive advantage far beyond even that granted to earlier great powers by the Industrial Revolution. Many commentators agree with the recent statement of the U.S. Special Competitive Studies Project that, "The geopolitical and technological imperatives of the emerging international landscape demand a grand strategy, one that harnesses the transformative potential of AI and other emerging technologies."[150]

How all of this will play out remains unknown. Export controls on semiconductors and other AI-supporting technologies may provide the United States with a significant and growing lead that it never relinquishes, or AI progress may stall across the board. New forms of AI may begin to deliver astonishing levels of national advantage, or not. The only thing clear today is that the potential of AI to be the single point of success or failure in the technology competition is very real.

Conceptualizing Endgames in Scientific and Technological Contests

The contest for the high ground of science and technology in the twenty-first century, and in particular for predominance in AI, represents one of the very few essential components of the larger U.S.-China rivalry.[151] Both countries have embraced strategies for scientific and technological advantage that are increasingly creating a zero-sum mindset in the other, both, evidently, without a clear sense of what success looks like.[152] One leading observer has noted that the United States "stumbled into" the generalized application of export controls and other technology restrictions: "We started using these weapons before we really knew how to use them."[153] As the intensity of the overall rivalry worsens, moreover, the significance of the technology competition will grow as well. The more each side comes to fear war as an inevitable outcome of the rivalry, the more each will view victory in the technology competition—and its implications for military and societal capabilities in conflict—as an existential priority.

The current U.S. approach to this contest includes many important and necessary steps—investing in U.S. science and technology, nurturing talent in key fields, protecting U.S. technology from slipping into the hands of rivals, and developing partnerships with allies and friends. But the present approach promises only endless competition without a horizon; it does not spell out a true long-term theory of success. The ways in which the United States can protect its most critical national interests and sustain truly necessary degrees of power and influence remain unclear.

Conceptualizing an endgame or vision of enduring success for a broad-based scientific and technological competition is extremely challenging, for several reasons. Treatments of the issue often use buzzwords like “control,” “hegemony,” or “domination” to describe potential great power influence over technology domains, but no such clean outcomes are likely.[154] Competition encompasses myriad frontier technologies and dozens of subcomponents within each domain. Perhaps most of all, because science and technology advance without end, establishing a clear threshold for success or anything like a singular endgame remains elusive. This makes the contest in science and technology different from the larger rivalry, which, as a geopolitical phenomenon, can (and, if history is any guide, will) end.[155]

Another challenge relates specifically to AI and biotechnology. In these areas, the United States and China face not only competition from one another, but also threats from the technologies themselves. Unconstrained development of these domains has the potential to pose existential risks to either or both sides. Any vision of success must seek to mitigate those threats as well as guarantee national competitive position. What vision of enduring and stable success would serve all these goals?

Visions of Success in Scientific and Technological Revolutions: The Lessons of History

Looking to history, specifically, to the last transformational scientific and technological advances, is essential to developing an answer. What lessons might the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Industrial Revolution spanning the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, and the twentieth-century computing revolution offer for conceptualizing success in the current scientific and technological competition?

This section relies on an extensive literature review, much of which was consulted for the RAND project on the social foundations of national competitiveness.[156] That literature reviewed the sources and character of the Industrial Revolution, the factors energizing national dynamism and development in general, explanations for the West’s stunning surge of economic and technological development after 1500, and more focused assessments of scientific and technological revolutions.[157] That broad set of sources offers several lessons that are applicable to the current scientific and technological competition. Taken together, they point in the direction of the three essential components mentioned above: domestic dynamism, network power, and resilience.

- **Technology revolutions encompass many interrelated technologies and techniques.** Different countries might lead in distinct areas, but overall success comes from remaining competitive in a wide set of areas and in ways that provide critical synergies. It is the holistic interaction of these technologies that produces major advantage.[158] During the Industrial Revolution, for example, the technologies of steam, railroads, mass production, and advanced agriculture, among others, comprised a much broader scientific and technological advance. Investing in a handful of leading technologies individually will not be enough for more comprehensive forms of success.
- **The essential basis for scientific and technological advance is a supportive package of social qualities, with values, habits, and institutions that promote innovation**

and its widespread adoption throughout society. Many studies have demonstrated the importance of social values, structures, and institutions to innovation.[159] The scientific and industrial revolutions were deeply grounded in such qualities, without which individual inventions and scientific breakthroughs would not have had their transformative effects. This understanding also comes in part from RAND's analysis on the sources of long-term competitive advantage, which highlights seven major societal characteristics—including a forward-looking ambition, shared opportunity among the people, a learning and adapting mindset, and effective institutions, among others—that create the context for more material forms of national advantage, be it economic growth, military power, or technological innovation.[160]

- **The supporting ecosystem for scientific and technological advance—including resources, infrastructure, energy, human capital, social values, and more—is the essential basis for long-term competitive advantage.**[161] Beyond the general societal characteristics that underwrite advantage in these areas, the most competitive nations have strong scientific and technology ecosystems—a broader context of material capabilities and networks, with elements ranging from capital to skilled workforces, and from transportation and energy infrastructure to intellectual networks among scientists and entrepreneurs—that provide the necessary support structure.
- **Science and technology are by nature shared and now global enterprises, and their advance cannot be limited to one country except in very specific industries and usually for limited periods of time. Any vision of success must think primarily in terms of generating greater national dynamism rather than denying advances to others.** There are exceptions to this rule, such as industries or specific technologies where one firm or country manages to acquire unique capabilities, tacit knowledge, and sometimes specific technologies to dominate an industry. Examples include the German optics industry in the twentieth century and the present-day Dutch semiconductor lithography producer ASML. As a rule, however, history suggests that countries exist within a broad flow of scientific and technological progress, which is often propelled by shared breakthroughs and ideas and even investment across borders. The degree to which nations keep up is a function of their own domestic qualities, not others' constraints.[162] During the Industrial Revolution, for example, efforts to quash others' progress played a relatively small role in determining relative standing, which was largely a function of key internal variables that determined each country's scientific and technological prowess. A vision of success predicated upon denying progress to a rival, except for in a very small number of highly targeted and usually temporary controls, will not work in the long run.
- **Scientific and technological innovation is often initially fueled by the insights and efforts of a relatively small number of critically important scientists, entrepreneurs, engineers, and tinkerers.** This was very much the story of the Industrial Revolution, in which a few hundred critical innovators, and a larger but still modest number of innovator-implementers in Britain, made a disproportionate difference.[163] (The lesson here is not that the actual breakthroughs from a handful of geniuses make all the difference—quite

the opposite, wider diffusion of those inventions, spurred by a broader community of application-focused engineers and tinkerers, is key. But those technically expert individuals who led the diffusion still represent only a tiny proportion of a nation's overall population.) Creating an environment that empowers such actors, both the original inventors and those making practical applications—with capital, the rule of law, regulatory clearance, and other supports—is therefore an important component of the wider domestic environment needed for progress. In its most successful guises, this is usually a process of "mass flourishing"—bottom-up aggregations of dynamism rather than centralized direction.[164]

- **First-mover advantage is not permanent, but catching up requires the right national support system.**[165] So far there has not been a general technological revolution monopolized by a single country. Second movers can catch up and sometimes have certain advantages from doing so, but only if they manage to cultivate the essential supportive ecosystem. In the industrial era, only one country—Japan—managed this feat from a position of significant inferiority. Some analysts believe that there may be a profound first-mover advantage in AI, because the first countries past certain thresholds will begin to experience explosive growth and innovation; but this is a contested idea, based more on speculation than hard analysis at this point.
- **Government support is almost always critical for at least some steps in the process.** There is a strong relationship between scientific and technological advantage and open, market-based systems, at least in the modern era. But comprehensive national programs of development, or efforts to align themselves to the demands of a new technological era, do not happen on their own. They require some level of what the RAND project termed an "active state"—efforts to promote and shape the necessary advances, and to mitigate their socioeconomic risks. Japan again provides a leading example of the competitive value of targeted and effective government action, both in the Meiji and postwar periods—through support for research and economic intelligence, direct backing for national champions, investments in infrastructure, and other means.
- **Diffusion is at least as important as technological breakthroughs to long-term sustained advantage.** There is a significant literature on the role of diffusion in generating technological advantage, much of it arguing that many entrepreneurs in different states might generate similar ideas and even test products, but if those ideas and products do not spread throughout a society and become applied in numerous ways, the country will not gain the full degree of competitive advantage.[166] The institutions, skills, and capabilities required for diffusion are somewhat different from those of initial innovation.
- **The accumulation of tacit knowledge is one of the most essential foundations for long-term success in scientific and technological innovation**. Tacit knowledge is understanding or expertise built up through long experience—things like insight, intuition, skills in operating equipment, and other forms of knowledge that are not formalized or objective and therefore are difficult to express or transfer. Significant evidence suggests that countries or firms which accumulate tacit knowledge in key fields gain the potential for long-term advantage.[167] This again points to the essential role of a broad-based socioeconomic

foundation for technological progress, one which embeds tacit knowledge throughout multiple firms and industries.

- **Scientific and technological advances reshape the societies in which they occur, in ways that either promote long-term solidarity, resilience, and dynamism, or that cause disruptions and instabilities that undermine competitive standing.**[168] History suggests that long-term success in scientific and technological competitions is not mainly, or even mostly, about simple measures of relative standing. Instead, such success concerns how technological advances echo through society and create or disrupt patterns of social, economic, and political life in ways that either enhance or undermine national competitive dynamics and resilience. Especially in their early phases, these effects can be deeply disempowering for workers and average people. The initial decades of the Industrial Revolution, for example, were devastating for wages and opportunities for many elements of the working and middle classes in Britain.
- **Countries that lead frontier technologies tend to become the hubs of international networks of research and production around those technologies, and to dominate norm and standard setting for these domains.** The fundamental international scaffolding for any science and technology revolution involves a combination of networks of exchange, norms, rules, and standards that end up providing advantages to some countries over others. Like so many other forms of advantage, these tend to reflect synergistic dynamics, with some elements building on others. During the Industrial Revolution, to cite one example, Britain's position in world trade networks, standard setting for emerging technologies, and influence in international institutions that began to set the context for science and technology reinforced the country's advantage conveyed by its domestic dynamism.

A Vision of Success

Developing a vision of success requires the United States to define its goals: What is it trying to achieve? What are the ends against which success should be measured?

The lessons of history and the challenges posed by China to U.S. interests suggest at least four necessary components, or objectives, of any concept of success in the scientific and technological rivalry:

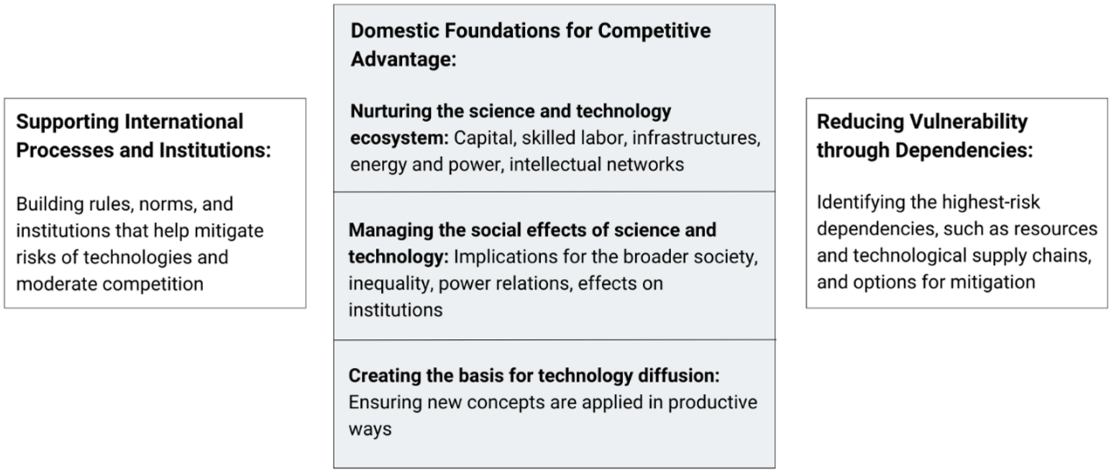
1. The domestic U.S. foundations of scientific and technological innovation, including the supporting science and technology ecosystem, must remain at a world-class level.
2. The domestic capability for the diffusion and application of those technologies—the financial and infrastructural foundations of the technology ecosystem, the domestic standard-setting processes, the supply of educated specialists to develop new breakthroughs, and much more—must be vibrant and effective at enabling the practical employment of advances.
3. No major rival should obtain a monopoly position or a lasting, dominant advantage in any critical field of science and technology.

4. The United States should remain free from catastrophic risk to its science and technology sector, military capabilities, or broader society due to foreign dependencies on supplies of the most essential components or materials or vulnerability to active disruption.

It is important to note that these objectives do not require the *United States* to achieve monopoly or a lasting dominant position in any arena. The lessons of history seem to be clear on this point: among the most advanced science and technology powers, the goal cannot be to achieve monopoly or controlling position in any technology area for a sustained period. Such outcomes are possible for a limited time and only in very specific fields. Long-term national security and power comes from seeking the four broader and more self-directed goals above.

Those objectives, combined with the lessons surveyed above, point to one essential finding about scientific and technological advantage: success starts not with performance relative to a rival, but with the qualities of a nation and its society that offer the basis for enduring innovation, development, diffusion, and societal mitigation efforts. That is the primary lesson of earlier scientific and technological revolutions. Britain did not actively seek to ruin French or Prussian/German modernization (or did so only at the margins). Instead, the country generated an engine of scientific and technological application that could not be matched. That was the only effective route to long-term advantage; and it was, in large part, when Britain lost the societal and economic prerequisites for dynamism that their advantage flagged, and they could not bring about an endgame of true success. Their earlier recipe for success is the model the United States should seek to follow. The Western technology controls applied to the Soviet Union made some difference, but the real determinant of success was the relative energy and dynamism of the two societies and their institutions.

Figure 2: Conceptualizing a Vision of Success in the U.S.-China Science and Technology Competition


Domestic Foundations for Competitive Advantage:
Nurturing the science and technology ecosystem: Capital, skilled labor, infrastructures, energy and power, intellectual networks
Managing the social effects of science and technology: Implications for the broader society, inequality, power relations, effects on institutions
Creating the basis for technology diffusion: Ensuring new concepts are applied in productive ways
Supporting International Processes and Institutions:
Building rules, norms, and institutions that help mitigate risks of technologies and moderate competition
Reducing Vulnerability through Dependencies:
Identifying the highest-risk dependencies, such as resources and technological supply chains, and options for mitigation

Source: Michael J. Mazarr.

The figure above outlines the three-part vision of success in graphical terms. As it suggests, the centerpiece for any enduring positive end state in such a competition is a domestic engine of dynamism and technological integration. Everything flows from that–national competitive advantage, resilience, and standing relative to others. The domestic foundation for success in turn has three major components: nurturing a supportive ecosystem for science and technology, promoting diffusion, and managing the wider social effects of technology for competitive advantage. As suggested above, those in turn rely on even more essential national qualities–ambition and willpower, solidarity, widely shared social opportunity, an innovative and learning mindset, effective institutions, and other factors essential to a healthy engine of dynamism.

The wider recipe for success includes two other elements which support that core domestic emphasis. One is a supportive international context in the form of rules and norms, and also friendly networks and coalitions that underwrite U.S. scientific and technological strength, so that the United States continues to sit at the hub of critical network power in science and technology. A second element involves a future in which critical vulnerabilities and dependencies have been mitigated to some degree, especially in that very small number of technologies or areas of scientific knowledge where ensuring some sort of lead or advantage may have disproportionate leverage over the wider competition.[169]

This approach does not emphasize holding China back as a necessary component of any vision for success. A good end state emerges from domestic vibrancy paired with strong positions in global networks. The challenge emerges in avoiding Chinese dominance in key industries where the United States and its friends and allies do not have competitive industries. There will be a great temptation to punish Chinese firms in order to attempt to level the playing field rather than push to develop indigenous capabilities, but in the long run that is likely to be a losing gambit. If Western 5G providers cannot offer competitive technology and prices to Huawei, sanctions will get the United States only so far in obstructing Chinese leadership in the sector.

While this simple formula leaves many questions to be answered, it also suggests a specific research agenda to flesh out this concept of success. Dozens of research reports have already been published on important questions bearing on these issues, including: the most essential technology areas in which the United States must ensure global competitiveness; technologies in which China has the closest thing to an emerging predominant position, the risk posed by each, and the essential elements of a sufficient U.S. position in them; sectors more subject to natural monopolies or "moats" preventing others from gaining equivalent positions; and specific supply chain or material dependencies that threaten continued U.S. science and technology progress. Questions that remain without definitive answers include the following:

- The most cost-effective investments and policies to promote the U.S. position in critical fields and thus sustain domestic dynamism (including a critical assessment of recent U.S. industrial policy support for key industries)
- The most important parts of the supportive ecosystem for leading areas of scientific research and technological innovation

- The most important mechanisms for the diffusion and application of innovations, including their weaknesses and areas where public or private action could strengthen them
- Strategies for overturning Chinese leadership in key areas (such as solar power and 5G) where they have achieved temporary dominance, in part by developing leapfrog approaches that position the United States for leadership in successor technologies

If the vision suggested here is indeed the route to success in the scientific and technological contest with China, then the United States may enjoy important advantages. Despite the large role of the private sector in China's development and technology sector, the United States continues to have a far more open system, one more intrinsically oriented to generating grassroots experimentation and energy. Recent trends suggest real problems for China, with the growing emphasis on the sort of orthodoxy and control that are devastating to innovation.[170] China is not and will never be the Soviet Union, but the U.S. system starts the race with intrinsic advantages.

There remains work to be done. The RAND analysis on the societal foundations of national competitiveness has suggested that the essence of the twenty-first-century competitive paradigm for great powers is effective governance of all kinds. And it has highlighted an urgent requirement for the United States: to transcend the social and institutional ossification, so characteristic of late-stage great powers, that has set in with many industrial-era institutions today. The modern analogy to the constraining orthodoxy, conservatism, and tradition that held back the laggards of the Industrial Revolution is red tape, bureaucratic inertia, path dependence, excessive hierarchy, and confining management techniques.[171] Finding ways to free as much progress as possible from these straightjackets—even while protecting humanity from the risks of some key technologies—may well be the best route to competitive advantage.[172]

This concept of a route to success in science and technology—one focused on spurring the United States' domestic dynamism—can fit nicely into a larger vision of a successful endgame for the rivalry as a whole. Rivalries do eventually end.[173] From the roster of historical possibilities, a peaceful endgame for the U.S.-China competition will have to involve mutual decisions—particularly one from China, as the dissatisfied power of the two—that both countries can better promote their long-term power and interests by transcending the zero-sum competition to some new form of relationship. Such an endgame is most likely to emerge through a combination of political shifts, changing perceptions of interests, and growing concerns about threats other than the rival.

It may take decades to reach that point. In the meantime, the United States, while competing and opposing Chinese goals and ambitions where necessary, can preserve the possibility for such a peaceful endgame by adopting strategies that deny Chinese hegemony, but do so in a way that is focused on U.S. strength rather than on trying to undermine China. A vision of success for science and technology built around U.S. domestic dynamism would achieve both of those goals.

The United States Needs a Broader Vision

By Lily McElwee

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Over the past decade, Beijing has firmly adopted a statist, security-driven approach to economic governance, become more coercive in its region, and begun proactively undermining liberal norms abroad. These developments required Washington to revisit long-held expectations for China's rise and move into a more competitive mindset. The United States is now transitioning from *diagnosing* to *addressing* risks posed by China. The Biden administration expanded the Trump administration's tariffs, multiplied export controls on high-end technology, and sought to unwind supply chains out of China. China-related bills increased over sixfold from the 113th Congress (2013-15) to the 116th Congress (2019-21).[174]

Many experts argue that Washington will need a concrete set of goals for its China policy, as intense bilateral frictions will endure for decades to come. Instead, the Biden administration has sought to compete with China where needed to sustain and advance the United States' preferred vision for the global order. This is a more durable and flexible approach, one more conducive to vital coalition building with U.S. partners in the years ahead—but it could use a stronger foundation. What is needed now is not a "vision of victory" for China policy but a bold and well-specified U.S. "vision of victory" for the global order.

Why Visions of Victory for China Policy Don't Cut It

Escalating U.S.-China tensions have led practitioners and analysts from the United States and elsewhere to suggest that Washington needs a vision of victory for its China policy.[175] Proposed visions range from outright regime change in Beijing at an extreme to sustained U.S. global dominance to policy-based goals seeking to blunt problematic Chinese behaviors until they change for reasons the United States cannot predict or foresee.[176] Advocates of any one of these visions of victory suggest that clear objectives for China policy will improve the focus and effectiveness of U.S. actions by guiding tough questions around prioritization and trade-off management, improving bureaucratic alignment, and providing more sustained signaling to allies and partners about the direction of U.S. policy.

Upon closer examination, these arguments run into several problems.

First, clarity on goals for U.S. policy toward China does not necessarily translate into more efficient and directed policymaking. Take the case of U.S. investment screening reform, for example. In 2016–17, a bipartisan set of lawmakers and both the Obama and Trump administrations expressed interest in more scrutiny of inbound Chinese investment. Despite consensus around U.S. goals (in this case, curbing openness to Chinese capital), various parts of the Trump administration, business community, and Congress came up with their own ideas of how to achieve them. Debates ranged from the jurisdictional (e.g., the locus of certain regulatory authorities) to the philosophical (e.g., the proper role of the state in commerce) to the practical (e.g., how to balance trade-offs, such as scalability versus nuance).

Clear goals for what the United States would like to see from China do not tell U.S. policymakers how to reconcile these tricky choices over priorities and trade-offs. This is clear from debates over outbound investment screening today. Proponents and opponents have a similar goal—to slow China's military modernization—yet reach very different conclusions on whether such a mechanism will help us get there. Advocates argue that U.S. investments in China need to be screened and, in some cases, prohibited to prevent Americans from funding China's technological and military ambitions. Opponents argue that such a mechanism is counterproductive: U.S. investments in China enable U.S. firms to keep tabs on innovations coming from the Chinese economy, an advantage the United States should not forfeit. Concrete goals toward China will not be a cure-all for tough decisions around prioritization and trade-off management in the policymaking process, as advocates suggest.

A second problem is that over-specified visions of victory for China policy lack flexibility, whether focused on China's political system, power, or policies. There is no guarantee, for example, that regime change in China would result in a country neatly conforming to U.S. interests. Some analysts have pointed to the example of Communist Russia giving way to Vladimir Putin's Russia to make this case.[177] Likewise, a weaker Beijing could still threaten U.S. interests. Russia offers another example: its gross domestic product (GDP) is 10 percent of China's and yet its actions have proven even more destabilizing and disruptive to international peace and prosperity in the past two years.[178] Declaring "victory" after China democratized, or grew substantially weaker economically or militarily, would be short-sighted.

The same is true for visions of victory for China policy that seek to blunt a set of Beijing's practices, defined *a priori*. Say "victory" were a China that approaches military modernization more transparently, calls off its territorial pursuits, promotes domestic consumption, and curtails problematic practices such as intellectual property theft, cyber hacking, and an increasingly statist approach to economic governance. For one, it would be challenging to know whether these practices had stopped for good or might be resumed under a new leader or the same leader down the road. Putin's Russia, for example, was causing far less trouble in 2012 than in 2022, and optimistic U.S. and European assumptions about its future trajectory 10 years ago led to problematic dependencies today. Moreover, new threats from Beijing could arise at any time, which might prove a better use of limited U.S. diplomatic attention and resources.

Third, visions of victory for the United States' China policy risk jeopardizing much-needed coordination with market democracies. U.S. power on the world stage is declining in relative terms. Still, the United States and its closest allies—including the G7 and key Indo-Pacific partners such as Australia and South Korea—boast nearly half of global GDP, over half of the world's largest companies by market capitalization, and among the world's most sophisticated militaries. Beyond this, unilateral U.S. measures only go so far in a world of long, globally diversified supply chains. Controls on advanced chips and chip equipment exports to China in late 2022, for example, only have a chance to slow China's military technology trajectory because Japan and the Netherlands followed suit. Allied coordination will, therefore, be essential to push back against China's coercive tendencies, deter its regional aggression, improve the effectiveness of U.S. technology and economic controls, and minimize the chances of loopholes and backfilling in technology protection.

This coordination is not guaranteed. Visions of victory for China policy will make it harder. The close allies mentioned above would distance themselves from a bid for political transformation in China, given their exposure to the Chinese economy and the amount of resistance such a goal would provoke in Beijing. Visions of victory directed at China's policies would be less off-putting to allies, but even G7 economies remain uneasy about naming China explicitly in policies clearly designed to address China-related concerns.[179] This suggests that unilaterally articulating a set of China-specific objectives will not necessarily make enlisting allied cooperation on everything from export controls to deterrence measures in the Indo-Pacific any easier.

Thinking Bigger

The Biden administration recognized these challenges in its 2022 National Security Strategy, committing to compete with China where needed—while aligning with partners and investing in domestic strength—to protect a "free, open, prosperous, and secure international order."[180] Many call this approach "managed competition," defined as competing across a variety of domains to reinforce and defend the international order that the United States prefers while avoiding conflict.

This approach has come under attack by Republicans and Democrats alike—the former publicly, the latter less so—for various reasons. Some argue that "managed competition" without an end goal for China makes U.S. competitive efforts unfocused. Others worry about room for interpretation of U.S. intentions among allies and partners in a way that undermines coalition building.[181]

These critiques have merit, as elaborated below. However, none are insurmountable under the current approach. Where "managed competition" has suffered is not in design, but execution. Strategic competition over the global order becomes difficult without a clear vision of victory for this order. In recent years, however, domestic consensus over the United States' preferred global order, and its role in sustaining this order, has come under strain.

Within the Republican Party, various "tribes" compete for influence. These include "restrainers" that would prefer a more isolationist foreign policy in favor of a greater focus on domestic issues—which would mark a major departure for a globally engaged United States over the past decades; "prioritizers" that emphasize limitations on U.S. resources and support a full-scale reorientation of strategic resources to the Indo-Pacific; and "primacists" that assert the United States can and must remain globally engaged.[182] Democrats under the Biden administration have declared ambitions to sustain the liberal political and economic order through broad international engagement, but even here, longstanding U.S. preferences for existing international rules and norms are clearly evolving.

Trade policy is one example where U.S. practice is departing from the principles of free and open markets that Washington used to espouse (across party lines) as a global priority.[183] The Biden administration eschewed traditional trade deals.[184] The Trump administration levied tariffs on China and U.S. allies alike and promises to do so again in a potential second term. Both major political parties now embrace industrial policy. Economic efficiency, once the gold standard for Washington and internationalizing U.S. firms alike, now comes second to other imperatives (national security, manufacturing jobs at home) in a "new Washington consensus," to cite a term referenced by U.S. national security advisor Jake Sullivan.[185]

This development reflects a broader reckoning over longstanding U.S. preferences for the rules and norms of interstate behavior. Understandably, perhaps, the world in 2024 looks different than it did during the United States' "unipolar moment" of uncontested military, economic, and technology leadership in the 1990s.[186] Global power is far more diffuse. China got rich in part by leveraging open markets in the West yet is now strengthening state-led economic governance at home. A revanchist Russia, regionally assertive China, and growing transnational challenges such as climate change and global pandemics have complicated the security landscape. A two-decade U.S. fight against transnational terrorism and "forever wars" in the Middle East have made Americans wary of sustained military commitments overseas and the sacrifices that come with global leadership.[187]

Yet, an underspecified vision for the global order leaves "managed competition" with China underperforming. For one, combating Chinese behavior without consensus on broader U.S. goals risks wasting national resources on fights the United States does not need to have. China's cooperation in certain domains may help achieve a world that benefits the United States. Should Washington care if China deepens cooperation with Africa in agriculture and public health?

Reduced global hunger and disease promises benefits for the United States, including fewer demands on U.S. resources to address these issues, less global political instability and risk of conflict, richer societies that buy U.S. goods, and less migration pressuring U.S. borders.

Further, absent an articulation of U.S. goals for the international system, allies and partners will indeed draw their own conclusions about the motivations behind competitive U.S. measures toward China. To boost European support for reducing reliance on China for critical goods, for example, European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen adopted the term “de-risking” to distinguish a European approach from what was familiarly seen in Brussels and key EU capitals as a broader “decoupling” by the United States. This deliberate distancing was a powerful reminder of the wariness in many EU capitals to fully align with a U.S. approach many see as overly aggressive and confrontational. Confusion around broader U.S. global objectives among key allies and partners leaves space for such wariness to thrive.

What is needed now is not a China-specific vision of victory but a well-articulated, bipartisan vision of victory for the global order. It is time for policymakers on both sides of the aisle to have hard conversations about the set of principles the United States would like to govern the international system going forward. This may seem an insurmountable task given the political debates over foreign policy and U.S. international engagement described above. On the other hand, most U.S. policymakers could agree that a vision for the global order is actually *needed*, which is more than can be said for a vision of victory for China policy itself. And this broader vision should be centered on a set of principles for state behavior rather than the resourcing and specific policies that will be required to support such principles–which is where the controversy generally lies.

This vision for the global order need not be revolutionary. “Winning” should mean the international system is characterized by policy preferences that both the United States and its closest allies have spent billions of dollars to sustain and advance as a basis for post-Cold War global peace and prosperity. These preferences must be adapted to geopolitical and domestic realities, but should include peaceful resolution of disputes, territorial integrity, the primacy of individual rights in international law and standards, unimpeded freedom of navigation and commerce, and space for democracy to flourish. U.S. strategy toward China and every nation should flow from this broader set of goals: the United States should welcome China’s international contributions but commit to blunt China’s behavior (or ability to carry out such behavior) where it threatens such principles.

A Stronger Foundation

The substance of United States’ China policy today would not necessarily change much under a more disciplined definition of global priorities. Preventing a Chinese attack on Taiwan that threatens an Asian democracy and risks destabilizing global confrontation, deterring China’s threats to freedom of navigation and trade in the Indo-Pacific, developing defensive mechanisms against Beijing’s coercive economic behavior, and fighting back against Beijing’s efforts to shape global rules and standards in illiberal ways would all be on the agenda. However, an approach of “managed competition” to shape the future international order is more flexible than a China-specific vision of victory. U.S. priorities toward China could evolve dynamically–based on a regular determination of where Beijing's behavior runs counter to the United States' preferred principles of the global order and, therefore, must be deterred or blunted.

Beyond its flexibility, this approach is conducive to coalition building. Support for a rules-based order—and a focus on threats that Beijing's behavior poses in this light—have been central themes of the China strategies issued by the G7, many NATO countries, and key Indo-Pacific partners in recent years. This includes Berlin's China strategy released in July 2023, the China policy paper of the Netherlands, the EU-China Strategic Outlook, and Tokyo's National Security Strategy in 2022, among others.[188] A principles-based approach to China strategy speaks to this common language, making it politically easier for these capitals to support U.S. competitive measures.

Finally, this approach is better suited to counter Beijing's bid for influence in the so-called Global South, a set of low-income and emerging economies that will increasingly shape the future global order. China builds influence in many of these countries by pushing a narrative that the United States is seeking to preserve its global hegemony at all costs and is unilaterally responsible for geopolitical tensions squeezing the development space of these economies. These narratives may seem far-fetched in Western capitals, but they get more airtime and traction in the Global South than is in U.S. interests. As one example, Beijing's packaging of efforts such as AUKUS, the Quad, and the U.S.-Japan alliance as a destabilizing "NATOization" of the Indo-Pacific has gone some way to deter Southeast Asian states from engaging with the United States on security issues.[189] Anchoring China policy in a clear, affirmative set of principles for the global order—and then following these principles—will help combat such narratives, more so than an approach more explicitly focused on forcing policy or political changes from Beijing.

Looking Ahead

Greater consensus around U.S. goals for the international system going forward, across party lines, would help U.S. policymakers tackle both the "policy" and "political" dimensions of strategic competition with China in the decade ahead. This would provide a concrete and sustainable foundation for dynamic U.S. foreign policy prioritization as Beijing's behavior evolves—and prove more useful in lubricating the joint action with allies and partners that will be necessary to resource U.S. goals in a more multipolar era.

A False Choice

By Evan S. Medeiros

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Contextualizing U.S. Debates on China

Since the end of World War II, U.S. debates about China policy have been both legendary and legion. They date back to the earliest days after the war, when scholars and policymakers asked big questions such as "who lost China?" As the Cold War raged, policymakers argued about how best to contain Mao Zedong's China when it was acting as the "OG" of rogue states with its extensive support for Vietnam and "third world" revolutionary movements. By the 1970s and 1980s, rapprochement and normalization sparked a different conversation about the optimum means of building U.S.-China ties. Engagement had become all the rage.

In the 1990s, U.S. debates about China changed, expanded, and intensified. Policymakers struggled to manage America's competing interests when it came to China (e.g., economics versus human rights) as well as diverging assessments of China's growing power. Conflict over Taiwan became a real possibility and a new axis of debate. China policy became even more politicized in Congress. In retrospect, the debates about China policy in this decade of great change became a Rorschach test of elites' beliefs about global affairs, embodying the pacifying influence of international integration and economic interdependence, the stabilizing effect of nuclear weapons, and the ability to shape authoritarian regimes, among other issues. This may remain so today.

Over the last decade, policy debates about China have come to focus, essentially, on two issues: (1) diagnosing the nature of the China challenge, and (2) prescribing strategies and policies to respond. The relative focus on diagnosis versus prescription has shifted as policymakers have responded to Chinese actions while navigating politics at home.

Debates about these two issues have taken a very different course in recent years, however. As China's capabilities have grown and as Chinese leader Xi Jinping began to act assertively, discussions about the nature of the China challenge have converged, in broad terms. While some differences persist, most policymakers and analysts now perceive Chinese goals, capabilities, and behaviors as being directed at undermining both U.S. interests and values.

By contrast, debates about the most appropriate response to the China challenge remain robust, with experts and officials constantly discussing the right mix of competitive and cooperative strategies. Competitive approaches have received far more attention and support in recent years, with discussions now focusing on a range of policies aimed at constraining, containing, and degrading Chinese capabilities. Indeed, strategies of both external and internal balancing are back in vogue. Such balancing strategies are even becoming linked in novel ways, as policies to expand alliances and to modernize U.S. industrial capabilities are now reinforcing one another. Nonetheless, the perennial grand strategy question of how to best mix policies of engaging, binding, and balancing Chinese power persists.

Understanding the New Era

All of this brings us to the latest iteration of the United States' China debates: end states versus steady states. In essence, the question is, does the United States need a specific end goal for its China policy, or can it be content with pursuing a steady state of persistent, albeit evolving, competition? This is a new and important evolution in the pantheon of China policy discussions. This question looks beyond the preoccupation with competition and cooperation by asking an even more fundamental question—an a priori question—about U.S. strategy. This question asserts that the United States needs to know the direction of strategy before discussing the right mix of tools to get there.

Answering this question is a particularly complex matter because most answers come embedded within a series of assumptions about China policy and U.S.-China relations, both past and present. Thus, answering it must begin with a precise understanding both of the current state of bilateral relations and of the United States' China policy. In that regard, the U.S.-China relationship is in a historically unique moment. While many policymakers and scholars tend to focus on the 40-year evolution of bilateral ties, doing so obscures the uniqueness of the current period. The U.S.-China relationship may be middle-aged, but it is experiencing a new youth—or perhaps a midlife crisis—and not a positive one.

The United States and China are in the early stages of the complex process of determining the scope and intensity of the competition. Washington and Beijing are still figuring out—both implicitly and explicitly—where and how they are going to compete: on what issues, in what regions, and using which mix of policy tools. (Notably, will nuclear weapons move to the forefront?) In this sense, the United States and China have only just begun to explore the arenas and boundaries of their competition. This moment bears some resemblance to the U.S.-Soviet competition in the late 1940s and 1950s. As in those decades, both sides are probing and testing one another in regions, in venues, and on various issues. Perceptions and policies are hardening on both sides, while the precise contours of the competition are still evolving and thus remain unclear.

As part of this process, both Washington and Beijing are trying to determine the precise national interests and, perhaps more importantly, the stakes for each other in this long-term competition. In practical terms this means that both sides are still exploring what risks they are willing to run and what costs they are willing to bear. The Cold War was both an intense ideological competition and a military confrontation, with Europe as the main theater and nuclear weapons at the center of it all. Economic and technological competition between the powers was secondary at most. The order and intensity of the drivers of U.S.-China competition will clearly be different.

For Washington and Beijing, this process will take time and will be intensely political in both capitals. During the Cold War, actions and behaviors in key regions shaped this phase of the U.S.-Soviet competition; the same will be true for U.S.-China dynamics. Just as the first Berlin crisis in 1948 set the stage for the then-emerging U.S.-Soviet rivalry, U.S.-China jockeying over disputes in the South China Sea and Taiwan may have a similar consequence. As with the early days of the Cold War, there are few rules or norms to guide or even bound today's competition.

Not Either . . . Or

This framing of current U.S.-China ties is critical to understanding the argument put forward here on the issue of end states versus steady states. In this bilateral context, the issue assumes a false distinction; there is, in fact, no need to make a binary choice. Both are needed, albeit in the right configuration.

An effective strategy toward China requires an end state, but it should be a general or broad one meant to guide policy choices. The end state should not be too specific or rigid because policymakers and strategists do not yet know the precise arenas, boundaries, or even rules of the competition. The end state needs to be able to evolve as the competition does. An end state with a general directionality and some elasticity provides this while also giving content and credibility to U.S. efforts at competition, including recruiting and retaining allies and partners. At the same time, a strategy that lacks any future orientation point risks meandering from crisis to crisis, misallocating resources, and being driven by domestic politics.

This varietal of end state should be an affirmative proposal focused on protecting and promoting U.S. interests (rather than opposing others). These interests should include the following: preventing the rise of a hegemon in Asia that could restrict U.S. freedom of action; preserving unfettered U.S. access to Asia (especially its markets); reinforcing the credibility of global rules and norms (on both economic and security issues); generating cooperation for transnational challenges such as climate change; and encouraging support for extra-regional security challenges, such as the war in Ukraine.

This approach offers several benefits. It is a positive vision focused on upholding interests and values which benefit multiple stakeholders beyond (and including) the United States. It offers broad international appeal because it puts the protection of nations' sovereignty, strategic autonomy, and respect for national conditions at its center. It leverages U.S. strengths and experiences over the past 70 years in defending a rules-based order. It is flexible enough to adapt as U.S.-China competition evolves and does not preclude additional competitive options. It creates plenty of room for China to choose to be more constructive, without requiring it to change its domestic political regime. Finally, it provides allies and partners with much to support, even as tactical policy differences emerge about where and how to compete with China.

In the context of current U.S. debates about end states, the approach offered here gains the advantages of the advocates and avoids the disadvantages of the detractors. It provides direction to policymaking as well metrics to measure success and failure. It offers the flexibility policymakers need to adapt to shifting Chinese behaviors, both positive and negative. The goals outlined above provide sufficient guidance on policy trade-offs, which would be hard even with a more specific end state. In sum, this approach—with its affirmative vision—not only guides competition management but also generates support for it, even amid its inherent vagaries.

This approach avoids trying to solve the China challenge in absolute terms, such as by advocating regime change (or another end state). It focuses on Chinese behavior rather than regime type, the latter of which could be problematic even under a change in Chinese leadership or a new governance model. Washington is more likely to be able to generate a domestic political consensus around these objectives than around more specific end states. None of the ideas outlined here will alienate partners and allies and, in fact, most will reassure them. Indeed, Washington might even gain a few fence-sitters with active and creative diplomacy.

Broadening the "Steady State"

The second half of the equation is how best to approach the "steady state" of managed competition. Current U.S. debates about the steady state often use the Biden strategy of "invest, align, and compete" as the baseline. This approach has both strengths and weaknesses. After the volatility of the Trump years, Biden rightly refocused U.S. strategy on domestic investments and alliance building to put the United States in a stronger position vis-à-vis China. However, Biden's approach to a steady state remains somewhat under-conceptualized. It has some important components but is not comprehensive enough to meet the demands of long-term competition.

At its core, the Biden approach mixes up apples and oranges and in doing so takes its eye off the bullseye of a long-term competition. "Investing" and "aligning" are both important means to balance Chinese power, and the Biden team excelled at expanding both in novel and creative ways.

But both are competitive strategies—both are varieties of apples. The third part of the Biden trifecta ("compete") is also an apple, and it is treated as a grab-bag category of policies meant to constrain and contain Chinese capabilities. Moreover, it begs many questions and would benefit from greater clarity.

The essential strategy question at the heart of a steady-state approach is broader than that implied by Biden's policymaking. Namely, what is the optimum mix of engaging, binding, and balancing policies that can achieve a steady state of competitive coexistence that advances U.S. interests and values. To continue the analogy, a strategy for long-term competition needs several types of fruit, not just apples. All three types of policies—engaging, binding, and balancing—are needed to compete effectively, especially on complex issues such as Taiwan. The mix can be adjusted as the challenges posed by China evolve and as U.S.-China dynamics evolve with it.

Dialogue and engagement get a bad rap, often dismissed as ineffective at best, and as appeasement at worst. U.S. policy has not been purely engagement with China since the 1980s. In fact, engagement is a broad category that encompasses multiple types of dialogue and negotiation. A recent positive example is National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's channel with Politburo member Wang Yi, which has been key to stabilizing relations in 2023 and 2024. Military communications, crisis management, and confidence-building measures are also types of engagement. These tools are critical to managing the scope and intensity of competition. In this sense, engagement policies enhance competition rather than undermine it. They improve deterrence and prevent competition from drifting into confrontation. In addition, such policies reassure U.S. allies and partners that Washington is not drawing them into an inevitable conflict, thereby making U.S. coalitions more sustainable.

Given the scope of China's global footprint and its substantial technological and military capabilities, a steady state of competition will require a broader support base in the world, especially among emerging powers and in the Global South. Such support can help bind China, including through means such as regional and multilateral commitments. In this sense, binding can function as a non-confrontational competitive strategy that focuses on creating a strategic environment in which China's choices are delimited. The Biden team made headway with traditional Asian and European allies in expanding support for its China strategy, both binding and deterring Chinese actions. But the current era will require the United States to cast a wider net and use different tools, especially with the Global South.

In order to effectively compete with China without resorting to confrontation at every turn, Washington needs to expand its competition tool kit to offer more and different things to countries. The most obvious candidates are initiatives aimed at helping countries improve their own infrastructures: digital, health, transport, and energy. An effective steady state of competition requires the United States to offer a better value proposition to others, such as high-quality and resilient infrastructure. The United States' ability to compete effectively rests on its ability to bring something to prospective partners and not just treat them as proxies in a great power contest. Ideally, these initiatives dovetail with U.S. domestic policies seeking to renew and expand U.S. industrial capabilities, including by creating new markets for exports. Finding and maximizing synergies between internal and external balancing creates both the political and the material foundations for long-term competition against a country as capable as China. Such synergies are perhaps the holy grail of steady state competition given their ability to broadly distribute the benefits of competitive policymaking, especially at home.

This essay offers one final point about crafting and maintaining a steady state of competition. For it to be politically sustainable in the United States (not just in Congress but within the business community) and to ensure access to the right kinds of resources, U.S. policymakers, over time, need to better articulate the boundaries of their competitive policies. On technology competition, U.S. officials often talk about pursuing a strategy of "small yard and high fences," but they do not explain the principles that will inform these limitations. In recent years, both the yard and the fence have grown, and they will likely continue to do so. Enforcement has been uneven as well, undercutting effectiveness. Policymakers, business leaders, and foreign partners will be more willing to support costly policies needed for long-term competition—such as reduced exports to China—if they have greater understanding about the boundaries of U.S. policy actions and greater faith in their enforcement.

This recommendation and the ones above are all designed to maximize the synergies generated by a China strategy that possesses *both a well-articulated end state and a steady state*. Such an approach provides sufficient clarity and direction for both policymakers and business leaders. It provides flexibility and an expanded tool kit to deal with the evolving challenge. Collectively, this approach unlocks domestic support, international assistance, and a broad base of resources (monetary, technological, and otherwise). All of this substantially improves the United States' ability to compete with China, but in a way that can be sustained over time and that can adjust as the challenges posed by China morph and change, as they inevitably will.

What Does the United Kingdom Want from a China Policy?

By Rana Mitter

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On July 4, 2024, the United Kingdom elected a new Labour government with an immense parliamentary majority. A wealth of foreign policy issues faces that government, notably the Russia-Ukraine war, as well as the wider issue of the United Kingdom's post-Brexit relationship with Europe. China does not loom large in public discussion, certainly compared to the moment four years ago when several issues put Beijing's actions at the heart of British decisionmaking: among them, the role of Huawei in UK critical infrastructure, the imposition of the National Security Law on Hong Kong, and the question of blame over the origins of Covid-19.

Yet there are plenty of signs that the United Kingdom will want to think about China in the medium term. One of the government's first actions has been to mobilize a "China audit" examining the relevance and role of China in all aspects of UK foreign policy engagement, from defense to trade.[190] There will likely be continuity with defense initiatives in Asia, such as AUKUS, and confirmation of trade-related plays, such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

It is a useful exercise to substitute the words "United Kingdom" for "United States" in answering the question: "Does the United Kingdom need a specific 'vision of victory' for its China policy?"

In Washington, there have been lively debates around whether victory is possible or can even be defined for the United States. For the United Kingdom, the question makes much less sense.

Working through an answer is worthwhile. The United Kingdom is still a country with global economic interests, particularly in services, considerable soft power, and a military and security role that makes it one of the most significant members of NATO. It may not be correct to think of the United Kingdom looking for "victory" over China (as it may similarly be incorrect for the United States). But knowing whether there is an endpoint, or at least a steady state, when it comes to the United Kingdom's relationship with China says a great deal about how other powers involved in the U.S.-China binary, but with roles of their own, may see the 2020s and 2030s.

Brexit Britain Navigating the U.S.-China Relationship

Ideas from government, business, and society in the United Kingdom regarding the country wants to end up with China is a function of the United Kingdom's current need to redefine itself in a world where previous certainties (e.g., Atlanticism, Europeanism, free trade) are more fragile. The United Kingdom is a close ally of Washington, yet finds the relationship harder to navigate and make relevant than a decade ago; it is a European power with a security narrative in formation and a trade and cooperation narrative that has narrowed since Brexit; and it is a seeker of opportunities in a Global South, which it has yet to fully understand or engage with. Its interests relating to China have to be seen through that prism.

In that context, does the United Kingdom of 2024 have a vision of what the China endpoint looks like?

The short answer is not yet. The majority of UK policymaking over the past two decades has been to find maximal trade opportunities with China while remaining vocal on certain values issues (for instance, the National Security Law in Hong Kong) and steadily increasing concern about UK security interests. But these have mostly been reactions, not proactive choices: domestic politics in the United Kingdom has been too turbulent in recent years to allow for a firm assessment of China policy, and the additional unpredictability of both Chinese and U.S. politics has made it hard to navigate toward a steady outcome. The major reviews of UK policy, the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy (2021) and the Integrated Review Refresh (2023), both gave a broad definition of policy toward China, defining it as an "evolving and epoch-defining challenge . . . to the international order."[191] However, there is a strong sense that the direction of travel in the 2020s has been toward treating China primarily in security terms rather than as a major opportunity for growth, particularly as investment in China becomes less attractive because of domestic regulation and a faltering economy.

As a result, one trend that will likely accelerate under the Keir Starmer government is coordination with the United States. It is extremely unlikely that the United Kingdom would support any version of China's global role that sits at odds with the policy of the United States, regardless of whether the president is Kamala Harris or Donald Trump. In an earlier era, there were occasional small exceptions. In 2013, former UK chancellor of the exchequer (finance minister) George Osborne could bring the United Kingdom into the Asian International Infrastructure Bank against U.S. advice, but that was at a time of relatively calm geopolitics, with a friendly U.S. administration and the United Kingdom firmly embedded in the European Union. A United Kingdom that is much less certain of its geopolitical links will not take a risk on links with China, particularly if those links risk the relationship with the United States on security. This does not mean matching on every element in the Indo-Pacific: while AUKUS involves deepening formal links with the United States, membership of CPTPP involves a relationship with an organization that the Trump administration left and the Biden administration has shown no signs of wishing to rejoin.

In the event that the United States sought "victory" over China in some form definable to a wider global audience, why would the United States be concerned about UK support? The United States would not be concerned for reasons of material support. The United Kingdom's assets in the region are simply too limited to make a decisive contribution; Japan and South Korea are clearly the key allies. However, the symbolic importance of the United Kingdom is not negligible when it comes to a "vision of victory." After all, this was the reason that Lyndon Johnson pressed Harold Wilson to support the United States in Vietnam (unsuccessfully), and George W. Bush looked for Tony Blair's support (successfully) over Iraq. London would almost certainly provide support of some sort for U.S. policy on China and might be a surer bet for that support than other major European capitals, but the form of that support might remain undefined until a moment of crisis—for instance, a call for sanctions that might be more damaging to the United Kingdom's smaller and highly open economy than to the United States. Any such UK action, of course, would have consequences and likely result in China categorizing the United Kingdom as a clear adversary by definition.

Britain as a European Actor on China?

One factor that will shape the United Kingdom's trajectory on China policy is the country's rapidly changing role in the European defense environment. This was already underway under the Sunak government, where bilateral relations with Paris and Berlin had greatly improved, and there was warm talk about greater security cooperation with Europe. However, a government that was a continuation of the one that had engineered Brexit would still have had trouble creating a warm atmosphere with a collective Europe, even defined in terms that went beyond the European Union. A Labour government without an anti-EU political strand will find it easier to engage with European actors.

Compared even to five years ago, there are thin but growing structures that allow the UK-Europe partnership on security to develop, in particular the European Political Community (EPC), formulated by French president Emmanuel Macron in 2022 as a means to include actors who were not EU members, and which has developed a strong orientation toward security issues. The institution will also morph over time depending on what foreign policy agenda is promoted by the U.S. administration in power from 2025, but the Starmer government will have a strong interest in making sure it has as central a role as possible in the EPC.

China will not be the first or most urgent issue on a security agenda with Europe: Russia sits at the top of the list, where the question of "victory" is more clearly defined by Europeans, even if it is increasingly harder to obtain. However, there are signs that, in a range of ways, the United Kingdom is already indicating interest in China as a wider security issue and will share that agenda with Europe as a whole. The United Kingdom may choose to press harder on China's support for Russia on dual-use technologies that have the effect of helping Russia's war effort and is likely to follow the United States' lead (or demands) on the restriction of Chinese access to sensitive technology and training.

The United Kingdom will continue to support the status quo around Taiwan and the South China Sea in terms of freedom of navigation. The term "status quo" might seem odd in the context of the United Kingdom's involvement in AUKUS, which extends the United Kingdom's presence in the region over time, but in light of Chinese pressure on regional maritime claims, the argument would be that the United Kingdom is contributing to maintaining the balance that is being altered by Chinese claims. Yet a harder question would be: Would the United Kingdom consider a change in Taiwan's status, brought about by coercion, to be an issue of fundamental concern? And would either NATO or the EPC, in both of which the United Kingdom would be a key voice, be the right forum to debate that viewpoint if European actors took a different view?

Endpoint Rather than Victory?

The ideal endpoint from the United Kingdom's point of view will be a settlement in which versions of the current status quo remain the case. There is no great desire to expend political capital to obtain an ideological outcome in China that is different from the current one—in other words, there is no current British equivalent with the standing of Margaret Thatcher as an advocate of a Cold War-style victory (on the left or right). If a U.S. administration were to adopt a "vision of victory" that demanded an ideological outcome, there might be some symbolic sense of adhering to that vision of the world, but it would be something the United Kingdom would choose to do on a minimal basis for the most part. Europe will simply loom larger, and even an expanded European defense ecology with a strong UK presence would necessarily be focused on Russia and not China. A desirable UK outcome would also need to consider the practical need to keep the country's core interests secure and viable. Therefore, any economic and infrastructural settlement would need to provide significant protection from cyberwar, as the prospect of direct UK involvement in regional Asian kinetic conflict is low, but the likelihood of the UK economy, which is heavily tied to international services, being vulnerable to cyberattacks is high.

At the same time, the United Kingdom also has other key aims where China is deeply relevant that do not sit simply in the security and defense space. The current Labour government, not wholly at odds with its Conservative predecessor, wants to see a global endpoint that involves a net-zero energy transition. For that to happen, there needs to be a realistic assessment of how far that will be possible without dealing with Chinese technology. More broadly, the United Kingdom's net-zero aims as a global influencer will need to take into account whether to support Global South countries in using one of the few global public goods that China produces: solar panels.

This is aside from the areas where the United Kingdom has trade interests and can no longer rely on the European Union as a powerful trade shield. If both France and Germany end up with policies that seek to accommodate China (and Russia), particularly if there is a more transactional administration in the United States, then the three Ls—luxury automobiles and goods, legal and financial services, and life sciences—in the United Kingdom's heavily service-dependent economy will need space to flourish, too, and cutting Chinese markets out of any growth model will be hard. The United Kingdom has various core interests, but one is being part of a global trading network at a time when free trade is not in fashion.

The question, of course, is whether such a UK-friendly status quo is attainable. If there were to be a fundamental shift in geopolitics—a conflict over Taiwan or the South China Sea—then the United Kingdom would certainly become tied to the United States' vision of the outcome. But without that shift, that gray steady state on China is probably the closest "vision of victory" that the United Kingdom is likely to be able to manage or afford in the world as it is now.

The Comfort of Ambiguity: Europe and the Future of the U.S. Approach to China

By Janka Oertel

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Europeans should be careful offering strategic advice on China policy to others generally, and maybe Germans in particular. Europe is desperately trying to support Ukraine after Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion. Failure to spend adequately on defense has left the continent ill-prepared for a contingency that was not only likely but certainly foreseeable. What the war has since made abundantly clear is that Europe does not only have a Russia problem, it also has a China problem. By providing strategic, diplomatic, economic, and military support to Moscow, Beijing has become part of the European security equation and now poses a more palpable risk than Chinese economic coercion, cyberattacks, or market distorting practices–even if all simultaneously present–ever could.

A strategic China-Russia axis is even worse for European security and economic interests than it is for the United States. Europe is economically, strategically, and geographically more exposed. China's increasing dominance in sectors crucial to Europe's industrial and economic future are challenging Europe's future prosperity and political stability. Europe, particularly Germany, has benefitted for decades from the close integration and complementarity of its own economy with that of China. However, a "China shock," possibly worse than what the United States went through–that is, a massive wave of deindustrialization and loss of competitiveness in crucial sectors–is now on the horizon. The outlook is grim. While a lot has changed in the rhetoric in Paris, Berlin, and Warsaw since the Trump administration first increased the pressure on Europeans to face up to their China-sized Achilles heel, real action has still mostly been emanating from Brussels. In member states, illusions about a "third way," a magic "middle ground," or even the delusional idea of Europe playing a "mediating role" between the United States and China continue to make up a surprisingly potent part of the policy conversation.

Given this, does it make the life of the European policymaker easier if the United States were to spell out its "vision of victory" for its China policy more clearly? Absolutely not. Ambiguity gives Europeans the ability to wiggle their way around the tough policy choices that a clearly defined vision of victory would entail, all while pretending to be either "on the way to being more closely aligned" or "basically almost fully autonomous" in their decisionmaking, depending on the outcome of the U.S. presidential election in November. Ambiguity leaves room for interpretation and appropriation.

The European Union and its member states have a self-interest in responding to Beijing's support of Moscow, China's assertive posture in the Indo-Pacific region, and China's market-distorting practices with overcapacities in key industries that are threatening to destroy the very sectors that have thus far provided for European prosperity. Without the stabilizing effect of economic prosperity, Europe lacks not only the financial but also the political basis for its ability to invest in military defense. This has been particularly evident in light of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, Europe's transition to a decarbonized economy in order to continue to lead on climate action, and the research, development, and education needed to form the basis of future wealth and progress. While the United States, under the last two administrations, has made significant efforts to counter or shield itself from the economic practices promoted by China's leadership under Xi Jinping and has heavily invested in preparing the U.S. armed forces for a potential conflict with China, Europe has been slower to act, as the political costs of taking similar measures appear overwhelming.

European policymakers like to point out that while U.S. and European interests vis-à-vis China overlap to a large extent, they are not identical, and they are thus keen on carving out a path that is at least domestically seen as genuinely European and actively distinct from the United States' path. This is particularly the case in Germany and France, where transatlantic skepticism is a relevant factor. For domestic political reasons, actions taken should thus by no means be seen as either a response to U.S. pressure (because who wants to be seen as being a poodle) or as a form of "ganging up" against China (because who wants to be seen as being a bully).

Being seen as aligned with the Trump administration's alleged endgame of "full decoupling" has been used as a strawman for inaction by European policymakers in the past. By using the phrase "de-risk, not decouple," policymakers suggest that Europeans have a more balanced and less aggressive approach to China, without having to explicitly state it. This framing implies that certain segments of the U.S. policy elite are more focused on achieving outright victory—favoring defeat over coexistence and dominance over balance—which could ultimately be futile or even exacerbate global conflicts, from kinetic wars to intensified disputes over climate action. When the Biden administration started to use the "de-risking" framing as well, it made it harder to keep this line of argument alive. Close transatlantic alignment on responding to Beijing remains highly contested. Europe wants its distinct strategy. And while it is clear that this would entail a serious new approach to economic policy, new investment, and a radical repositioning vis-à-vis Beijing, so far the political will needed to pursue this approach is missing. "Not like the United States" then becomes a comfortable fallback option, but that is much easier stated if the U.S. approach remains ambiguous in its end goal.

So, what could happen if the next U.S. administration were to specify its vision of victory?

Let's assume the next U.S. administration was to say: "The United States has to continue to be the dominant military, technological, economic, and security player in the Indo-Pacific region. It has to maintain the ability to push back against Chinese pressure wherever it challenges this core interest or the interests of U.S. allies, and the United States will use all available means—from economic and trade tools to the use of military force—to defend its role of global superiority, which would include: the defense of Taiwan out of pure U.S. self-interest; the destruction of Chinese high-tech ambitions through export controls, where possible, and sabotage or coercion, where needed; and the use of all possible means to force allies to follow suit." This would mean a United States seeking to win systemic competition, striving to maintain and restore superiority through demonstrating the failure of the Chinese system, and embracing the possibility of at least massive weakening of China, but even a political collapse or regime change—or in a nutshell, a different China.

The knee-jerk reaction of European policymakers would be to seek distance. Rather than winning systemic rivalry with all possible means, they would argue, the twenty-first century should be about proving the capacity of democracies to deliver a green and digital transformation and to guarantee security and stability. They would underscore that Europe certainly does not seek regime change and does not have a problem with losing superiority in global politics and trade because it does not have it in the first place. This would, however, imply that: (a) the Chinese leadership has no ambition to win systemic rivalry and does not see the current situation as such (which unfortunately it has clearly said it does), and (b) that it would not matter to European policymaking whether the United States or China leads in military, technological, or economic terms, that Europeans could basically accommodate either in this role. This is a crucial but often only implied point. For some Europeans, the prospect of a Trump-led United States makes the difference between global leadership of the United States or China a more optional question. And for some, the focus on renewed fossil fuel extraction becomes scarier than the idea of an authoritarian, surveillance-prone, aggressive, green-tech superpower that dominates the industrial supply chains of the future.

For those interested in European territorial integrity and the survival of democracy, market economy, freedom, or privacy, this is a questionable proposition. But the clarity in approach on the U.S. side would necessitate policymakers in Europe to make the case for why they believe that it would be in Europe's broader strategic interests to push back hard against U.S. policies that are trying to undermine Chinese dominance in key industries, strategic theatres, and emerging technologies. And they would have to do so under conditions of extreme economic pressure, as many leading companies in Europe have used the incentives of the Inflation Reduction Act and other Biden administration policies to invest more deeply into a U.S. footprint in production, supply chains, and shifting market shares. The economic cost of pushing back against the United States would have to be factored into, and would ultimately challenge, the political equation.

Let's assume on the other hand that the next U.S. administration decides that it has a much more limited endgame for its China policy—one that really ignores Europe for the most part. It could say: "Only the direct contest matters. The United States would happily concede global leadership to China as long as Beijing never has the ability to coerce or attack the United States. The United States will become more self-sufficient; it will continue to be an attractive market and a place for international investment and talent, but it will focus on domestic consumption and production, relative military strength, and a highly flexible interpretation of where intervention is deemed necessary." This would represent a more inward-focused and self-centered approach, where allies and partners play only a marginal role, if any at all. In this scenario, Europe is left to manage its own security, and every nation is expected to fend for itself, with Washington operating under the assumption that the United States would maintain a relatively stronger position for the foreseeable future.

European policymakers would likely find this option equally problematic. As soon as a U.S. administration clearly spelled out a game plan for an isolationist, self-centered rivalry that is national rather than systemic, Europeans would have to relate to it without the comforting ambiguity of the current approach, where they can alternate between condemning the United States for overly confrontational policies and benefitting from actions taken that are in the European interest in the first place, all without having to pay a political price. Such a U.S.-centered endgame would force Europeans to make tough policy choices, accrue greater debt, and invest more in industrial capacity and consumption at home. It could also lead to some allies making different choices, exerting enormous pressure on EU structures, and making it even harder to come to collective action. Smaller countries, less dependent on the United States, might seek the opportunity in a changing global order to be on the "right side" of the new global leader and see a benefit in closer alignment with China.

Ideally, the United States could define its "vision for victory" with regard to China—or choose not to—and it would have no effect on Europeans doing whatever they possibly can to improve their own position under the current geopolitical circumstances: more scrutiny for Chinese production and investment in Europe; greater focus on strengthening competitiveness in areas exposed to de-industrialization so that it is adequate to the scale of the problem and the speed with which it is coming at Europe; creating improved structures to deal with economic coercion and critical dependencies; and galvanizing the political will to dare greater European integration, make the tough political choices to strengthen European defense, and invest collectively in the green and digital transformations to ensure technological leadership and future prosperity.

This would be a European reality where the lack of unity around these goals would no longer be optional, but imperative—and in which Europe could make actual choices. As this dynamic was not unleashed by the existential threat of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine and Beijing's strategically enabling role, it seems hard to fathom what kind of shock would be needed to get to this point. On China policy, even a second Trump administration might not be enough—precisely because, even among his supporters, there is no clear agreement about the actual vision for victory. Neither is an alignment within the Democratic Party around one precise vision for victory very likely. Ironically, it could be this ambiguity on the strategic aim that will throw European governments a lifeline so that they may maintain incessant complacency and as a form of collateral damage make it even harder for both sides of the Atlantic to actually deal with the challenges posed by Xi Jinping's China, collectively and individually.

Concrete Goals and Strategic Bargaining with China

By Susan Shirk
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The U.S. government needs to specify concrete goals for its China policy to incentivize Beijing to act more responsibly as it pursues its ambitions. Americans have no choice but to coexist with China under Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership for the foreseeable future. Therefore, the United States needs a strategy to influence China's decision calculus so that it acts constructively, or at least in ways that are less harmful to other countries.

An effective strategy requires that the United States identify the Chinese behaviors that it wants to change and that the CCP leadership might be amenable to change under the right circumstances; communicate these specific demands to the Chinese leadership; and use a mixture of negotiations, pressure, and reassurance to motivate the leadership to adjust its behavior. Underlying this practical approach, the United States should make clear that the way it treats China depends entirely on China's own conduct, not on U.S. ideological preconceptions or domestic politics. The overall objective of the United States' strategy should be to motivate China to moderate its policies and improve its conduct.

Primacy and Strategic Competition

The alternative conceptions that have dominated U.S. China policy over the past decade—U.S. primacy and strategic competition—have not been at all effective at persuading Beijing to act like a responsible power. From China's perspective, these are simply synonyms for Cold War-style containment.

The widespread notion that the United States should claim global primacy in every domain—holding on to the top slot in the global pecking order—may sound appealing to American ears, but it has not gotten the United States anywhere with China. The idea of complete primacy is an outdated holdover from the exceptional period of U.S. unipolarity in the immediate wake of the Soviet Union's collapse, at a time when China was still an extremely poor country. Primacy now smacks of a playground fight, not a principled aspiration for peace and order. No country, however capable, can expect to be the best at everything. For example, nothing can stop the rest of the world from buying Chinese solar panels and electric vehicles that offer superior value, even if the Chinese government subsidized the takeoff of the green tech sectors. Defining the bilateral relationship as a universal zero-sum contest also alienates the United States' partners, who do not want to have to choose between China and the United States. This framework also discourages Beijing from making the compromises necessary to preserve a constructive relationship with the United States and its neighbors. Why should Beijing calm relations with other claimants in the South China Sea or resume dialogue with the Democratic Progressive Party government in Taiwan if it cannot expect to gain any appreciation from the United States or its neighbors?

At the next level of goal setting, the U.S. framework of "strategic competition" or "managed competition" is overly vague. Without a clearer conception of success, there is no way for the American public, Beijing, or allies and partners to assess how well the United States is doing. Moreover, the competition framing creates global uncertainty by setting no limits on how extreme U.S. actions such as tariffs or other sanctions might become and offers no reason for Beijing to cooperate with the United States by restraining itself.

Most important, neither "primacy" nor "competition" has effectively motivated Beijing to moderate its behavior. These approaches simply have not worked. China's behavior today is just as harmful, or even more harmful, to the United States, its neighbors, other countries, and China's own citizens as it was a decade ago.

China's intimidation of Xinjiang, Hong Kong, India, Australia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, and Lithuania, among others and its support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine have hardened U.S. perceptions of the Chinese threat. Although China has not invaded another country as Russia has, the Trump and Biden administrations have treated China as the greatest threat to the United States' security, economy, and values. Washington's accusations of genocide against Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, nervous talk about an imminent war on Taiwan, and economic and financial sanctions, some of which are unprecedented except in wartime, have mobilized Americans to ready their defenses against the China threat, but they have failed to provide any incentives for Beijing to ameliorate its policies. Instead, Beijing is currently expanding its nuclear deterrent and pursuing technological and economic self-reliance in its own preparations for a possible war with the United States.

Given the dangers of this downward spiral toward military confrontation, shouldn't the United States revise its approach to China by testing the potential for intensified diplomacy that uses carrots and sticks in a targeted strategic manner?

Possibilities for Negotiated Agreements, Today or Tomorrow

Although Beijing is unlikely to make fundamental changes in its system or modify its approach to Xinjiang or Hong Kong, there are other important areas where compromise may be possible if Washington presents realistic demands and offers. Chinese leader Xi Jinping still appears motivated by a desire for international respect. There are also issues where pragmatic adjustments might help Xi shore up his lagging domestic support during this period of economic and fiscal distress. China is dealing with an economic slowdown, an aging population, high youth unemployment, and a middle class whose real estate assets are losing value.

Based on my own interviews, I believe that many among the Chinese elite are disenchanted with Xi's overconcentration of power and his policy missteps. Some might dare to encourage Xi to respond positively to the United States' diplomatic offers if they seem beneficial to their country. Moreover, China's domestic dynamics are unpredictable, and Xi will not be in charge forever. Making reasonable offers now will increase domestic pressure on Xi to reach agreements with the United States and encourage his successors to negotiate if Xi does not.

My own experience in government as the deputy assistant secretary of state responsible for China (1997-2000) was more than 20 years ago, during what might, in retrospect, be considered a golden age of U.S.-China engagement. During that period, arms control negotiations by professionals such as Bob Einhorn, backed up by the threat of sanctions, helped convince China to stop proliferating nuclear and missile technology. And trade negotiations by professionals such as Charlene Barshefsky, combined with the inducement of Permanent Normal Trade Relations and increased foreign direct investment, convinced China to open its markets to meet the requirements for membership in the World Trade Organization. China's legal system and access to information through commercial media and the internet improved largely due to domestic initiatives reinforced by a welcoming attitude from the West.

Admittedly, China has changed significantly since that time, as I discuss in my book, *Overreach: How China Derailed its Peaceful Rise*.[192] Nowadays, a cloud of pessimism lies over Washington's policymaking toward China. The American policy elite has concluded that the United States and China are destined to be hostile adversaries and that nothing the U.S. can do will change that. Xi's overweening nationalist ambitions and his dictatorial rule reinforce gloomy expectations of China's behavior in the future. Many politicians and experts have abandoned hope for leveraging Xi's choices through negotiations even now that the United States has restored its position of strength and dispelled misperceptions that it is a declining power.

It is too soon to give up on diplomacy, however. China's post-Mao political history contains surprising twists and turns driven by domestic and international factors, which should lead observers to reject deterministic predictions about future Chinese behavior. In fact, such factors—including human agency, especially the decisions of individual leaders; the swing from collective leadership to centralized dictatorship; shocks such as the 2007-08 global financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic; and incidents such as NATO's 1999 accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade—have produced unexpected shifts in Chinese behavior. China's future is likely to be equally unpredictable and could open avenues for well-crafted diplomatic efforts as well as create new dangers.

Adding to the uncertainty about China's future is the fact that, as of 2024, Xi's power looks to be past its peak. Since 2019-20, the strongman leader has confronted daunting economic and political realities at home, many of them related to his mishandling of the Covid-19 pandemic and his fetish for social control over economic development.

Xi's lockdown of Shanghai and other cities and then the sudden reversal of his zero-Covid policy in reaction to widespread protests left the population collectively traumatized.[193] In the absence of government assistance to households struggling with layoffs during the pandemic, consumption has plummeted, and deflation and unemployment have taken hold.

Foreign investment has also cratered, as even the most bullish investors have grown skittish about the risks of betting on Xi's China, which nowadays looks more like a police state than a developmental state.[194] When, in 2024, foreign investors withdrew more money than they put into Chinese equities markets for the first time in a decade, Beijing's first response was to stop publishing net investment flow data, a suppression of economic information that is bound to further erode confidence. Data secrecy, erratic interventions in financial markets, and crackdowns on the private sector have so alarmed Chinese entrepreneurs that many of them have exited China to seek opportunities elsewhere. This would be a logical time for the U.S. government to press Xi to expand market access and legal protections for foreign businesspeople instead of restricting financial flows to China in the name of national security; anything to restore investors' confidence should be a high priority for Xi. Reviving proposals for a bilateral investment treaty or an agreement that combines China's "voluntary" export controls with a U.S. policy to allow Chinese foreign direct investment in certain sectors in the United States with appropriate security protections, as the United States did with Japan in the 1980s, might also be beneficial to both economies.

Many Chinese believe that Xi's mishandling of foreign policy has left China in a weakened position. Xi's support of Russian president Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine is controversial within China and has estranged Europe and the United States.[195] This self-defeating policy has reinforced the backlash from advanced democracies, including Japan, South Korea, and Australia, against China's provocative military pressure on its neighbors and Taiwan. Moreover, Xi has no way of knowing how capable his military is because he has jailed the key generals he selected to lead the modernization of the strategic missile program, who turned out to be corrupt and deceiving him about the performance of the new equipment.[196]

Chinese elites and the public alike have lost confidence in the competence of Xi's leadership. As an aging strongman heading toward a fourth term with no successor in place, Xi must also be anxious about possible challenges from other CCP leaders. The United States' own strategy should be more cognizant of Xi's domestic dilemmas without explicitly pursuing regime change. The United States' audience is mainly Xi, but it should extend to other elites who might persuade him to shift gears or eventually to transfer power to a successor. Showing a reasonable face to the elites who will govern China in the future makes good sense. This is the context in which the next U.S. administration should pursue a practical strategy to motivate changes in Chinese behavior.

Strategic Bargaining with Beijing

It is unclear whether Xi's regime is influenceable. However, the United States needs to test the possibility of mutually beneficial compromises by clearly communicating to Beijing the specific actions it wants it to take and then negotiating with China through the strategic use of pressure and inducements linked to these actions. More intensive communication with Beijing will enable Washington to reinforce the message that good relations with the United States are contingent on China's own actions. The United States will retaliate in various ways when China pushes other countries around, but on the other hand, if China can restrain itself and get along well with others, the United States should be willing to retract sanctions and extend a friendly hand.

An effective strategy is not only linked to specific goals but also melds reassurance with threats. The more explicit the United States can be about the actions Chinese decisionmakers could take to improve relations, the more likely it is to motivate them to act on them. And if this strategic approach fails to moderate Chinese actions, the United States will have learned something important about what it will take to be more effective in the future. Some might argue that the United States already ran this experiment in the 1990s and failed. Others might argue that it succeeded but only because China was still weak. But in my view, the United States abandoned it too soon and needs to test it again, especially now that Xi has damaged China's national interests and his own standing by overreaching.

A negative example is the Biden administration's recent campaign against Chinese "overcapacity," which is flooding the world with cheap exports that exceed domestic demand and harm producers in the United States and other countries.[197] When U.S. officials complain about this unfair phenomenon, they frame it as a feature of the heavy hand of the state in the Chinese economic system instead of targeting a specific set of government subsidies such as the export tax rebates that could be eliminated to mitigate the problem. How is Beijing supposed to get back into Washington's good graces without specific asks to guide its responses?

Nor has the Biden administration's approach to managing technological competition with China been linked to specific Chinese actions that are objectionable to the United States. Instead, Washington erects barriers to Chinese technological advances because some of them leak from civilian into military capabilities, broadly speaking. Because putting successful Chinese companies such as Huawei on the entity list and banning U.S. outbound investment to China are costly to the United States as well as China, these sanctions are viewed by China as credible signals of a hostile containment policy. The U.S. mode of technological decoupling appears to have no limits. It keeps bleeding into new sectors and has not been connected to specific Chinese malfeasance; rather than motivating Beijing to act more considerately, it has only served to heighten its determination to achieve technological self-reliance.

National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's public statement that the goal of U.S. technology policies is to keep "as large a lead as possible" to ensure that "technology that could tilt the military balance . . . is not used against us" sent the wrong message.[198] Instead, he should have identified the specific ways that these advanced military technologies have been used to coerce Japan, Taiwan, or other neighbors and linked them to U.S. restrictions on semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and other advanced technologies. The message should be that openness with trade and investment partners depends on their eschewing the use of force against other countries. Sullivan could have argued that were China to ease off its military intimidation of Asian neighbors, the United States would be prepared to reduce its technology restrictions against Beijing.

Similarly, if China were to allow the International Committee of the Red Cross or another respected organization to inspect Xinjiang and certify that the reeducation camps have been closed and that recruitment of workers is entirely voluntary instead of "forced labor," the United States should also be prepared to end its economic sanctions against Xinjiang and permit imports of cotton, silicone, and other products from the region.

In contrast, the Biden administration has been much more targeted in its efforts to prevent Xi from assisting Putin's unprovoked war in Ukraine. Before Putin invaded, President Joe Biden directly warned Xi that if he provided military aid to the Russian invasion, the United States would impose severe sanctions on China. From the standpoint of Europe and the United States, preserving the sovereignty of Ukraine and other countries that border Russia is what the Chinese would call a "core interest." This leader-to-leader communication was effective in dissuading China from giving lethal military support to abet Russia's aggression, which would have been unpopular inside China as well as financially costly. Subsequently, when Xi started helping Russia revive its military-industrial complex to meet its wartime needs, including by producing military equipment (a form of gray zone military assistance), the Biden administration's clear and forceful diplomacy failed to persuade Xi not to support Putin. This discouraging outcome indicates that to overcome Xi's affinity for Putin, the United States and Europe will have to ramp up both threats and promises to the Chinese leader.

Negotiating with China based on clear and targeted goals in a respectful manner that connotes goodwill toward the Chinese people may not always succeed. However, it will provide a foundation for a more stable relationship in the future and tell the United States whether it needs to move into an even harder defensive crouch. Only if a series of strategically designed diplomatic interactions attempted over an extended period of time fail to moderate Chinese conduct should Americans conclude that the only option is to pull the grim trigger to deny and degrade China.

Victory Is Not an Option

By Melanie Sisson

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People like to win. And why shouldn't they? It satisfies the id, the ego, and the superego all at the same time.

Those most in thrall of winning tend also to be those most certain that victory is within reach. They are confident pitfalls can be anticipated, traps avoided, and obstacles overcome. They urge on the hesitant with motivational affirmations and quiet the questioners with oblique insults to their valor. They emphasize the righteousness of their cause, the perfidy of the competitor, and use both to rouse and to galvanize.

In times of war, the call to victory is indispensable because it works on the mind the way a fictional leader of men described the recommending attributes of rum: it incites violence and liberates from self-doubt.[199] At most other times in international politics the call to victory is dangerous, for the same reason.

The United States is not at war with China. China is not at war with the United States. Neither state's survival or prosperity is furthered by the other's destruction, physically or ideologically. To the extent that there is symmetry with the Cold War—the memory of which has softened since its death and become remarkably forgiving of its menacing character and many excesses—it lies in both sides' conviction about the superiority of its own model of domestic politics.

There are, nonetheless, those who wish for the United States to pursue victory over China—who seek not to manage competition indefinitely but rather to produce an end state in which the United States has "won." It is not wrong to agitate for a clear articulation of what the United States seeks to achieve in the world and an explanation of how it plans to do so. There is, indeed, a pressing need for a U.S. strategic vision that is more than getting through today to get to tomorrow.

Victory over China is not that vision. The purpose of U.S. foreign policy is not to vanquish the United States' competitors. It is to create conditions that allow Americans to live, in Franklin D. Roosevelt's enduring phrase, in freedom from want and in freedom from fear.[200] Seeking to defeat China would do neither—it would only make Americans economically worse off and the world less safe.

A Victory that Would Utterly Undo Us

A U.S. defeat of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) can come about in one of two ways: as the outcome of a kinetic war that produces surrender, or through internal dissolution that either cascades from the leadership down or surges from the citizenry up. For the moment, no one openly advocates for victory by violence, though there are some whose views on the U.S. role in the cross-strait dispute over Taiwan's international political status reveal that war is not their least-preferred option.[201]

War—begun over Taiwan or as the result of another dispute—would do more harm than good to U.S. interests.[202] This is true even if the war were to remain conventional—and there is no reason supported either by history or by theory to presume that the likelihood that it would not escalate to nuclear exchange is any greater than the likelihood that it would.

Even if the United States were to win a conventional war with China—an outcome that is far from certain—the net effect would still be profoundly negative.[203] Such a confrontation would very likely include cyberattacks on domestic U.S. digital assets and critical infrastructure. It would destroy U.S. military platforms, take the lives of U.S. servicemembers, kill civilians, and cause an enormous amount of damage in Taiwan, throughout East Asia, and possibly within the broader Indo-Pacific.[204] It would have unknown effects on U.S. regional alliances, drop the bottom out of the global economy for an imponderable period of time, and turn China's domestic political situation into a giant, seething question mark.[205]

The outlook for victory by internal political dissolution is not much better. Those drawn to this idea seem to believe that government collapse is more likely to occur without immediate or sizable intra- or interstate violence than with it, though there is no analytical method through which to arrive at a defensible conclusion about which of these outcomes is more probable. China's history of such transitions, however, might offer some instructive insights.

It is similarly difficult to take solace in the optimists' view that China's domestic politics ultimately would resolve into "the end state desired by a growing number of Chinese: a China that is able to chart its own course free from communist dictatorship."[206] This is a possibility. It also is a possibility that this prediction is based on an overly rosy view of the aspirations and commitments of the average Chinese citizen–of which there are almost 1.4 billion–and that the result would be something far less desirable.[207] There is, again, no social-scientific method to assess the relative probabilities of the many possible outcomes such a political undoing might produce. Russia's history, as well as that of other post-Soviet states, however, might offer some instructive insights.[208]

The economic effects of an unraveling of CCP control, whether violent or not, would doubtless constitute an enormous shock to China's economy. There is no way to predict the contours and duration of this disruption, but it is implausible to think that the derailing of normal economic activity inside China would not ripple outward to shock economic activity elsewhere. And there is no objective measure to suggest that a dramatic reduction in the extent or quality of China's participation in global commerce and finance would do anything except harm economic growth in the United States, or in any other country. In a private exchange about what might happen in such a situation, the chief economist of a large global investment management and research firm offered, "Nobody can say, really. But it seems like it would be bad."

Off Target

Prior to reaching any end state–good or bad–aiming for victory points U.S. policy toward costly non-liberal economic practices and risky military confrontation. Today's economic prescriptions for beating China include imposing high tariffs on imported Chinese goods, enacting export controls and supply chain requirements that restrict access to China's commercial market, and favoring bilateral trade deals over multilateral free trade agreements.[209] Such parochialist and protectionist policies harm the U.S. economy and strain its otherwise productive, long-term relationships with allies, partners, and friends worldwide.[210]

Military prescriptions for beating China invariably include increases in U.S. defense spending and plans to bulk up U.S. military presence in the Indo-Pacific. This is despite the fact that although Americans are increasingly uncomfortable with China's growing presence in international affairs, they are not more concerned about China's military power than they are about its human rights record.[211] It also is despite the math: expert analysis estimates that in 2024 China's defense spending totaled $471 billion–"around 36 percent of comparable U.S. defense spending of about $1.3 trillion."[212]

The work of trying to beat China, it would seem, will come at a steep price to the American–and global–economy, while also requiring the United States to outspend China on defense by more than the current ratio of nearly 3 to 1. It is insufficient to justify this differential on the basis that the United States is a global power with global interests while China's concerns are regional. It is, after all, China's global threat to U.S. interests that proponents cite as the impetus for the drive to victory in the first place.

Infusing the Indo-Pacific with U.S. warfighting capability would further provoke China's anxieties about U.S. intentions toward Taiwan and exacerbate Beijing's fears about the security of its nuclear arsenal.[213] What it would not do, therefore, is decrease the likelihood of war. It also would not restore U.S. dominance; as remarked by noted defense experts, much of the military superiority the United States enjoyed after the Cold War "is gone . . . and it is not coming back."[214]

It's Not Them, It's Us

The United States does not need to defeat, contain, convert, or befriend China. What it needs is a strategy for which the measure of success is what the United States does or does not achieve, not what China does or does not do. Such a strategy will continue to focus on creating the conditions that keep Americans in freedom from want by generating domestic economic productivity and in freedom from fear by minimizing the likelihood of war.

An affirmative U.S. strategy designed to generate domestic economic productivity will seek to stimulate innovation by growing and attracting human talent, by investing in the research centers and supporting the companies that are developing and applying the next generation of modern technologies, and by promoting access to resource and commercial markets worldwide. It also will attend much more purposefully to the quality of U.S. participation in the institutions that have guided the post-World War II global economy. This is not a bromide about the ability of institutions to constrain powerful states or about the power of diplomatic engagement to settle scores and mend ties.[215] It is a response to the reality that China has made significant investments of capital and talent in expanding and enhancing its ability to shape the operations and outputs of these post-war institutions for the purposes of advancing the interests and values of the CCP. If the United States prefers that the rules that these institutions produce hew toward the interests and values of the United States and other liberal democracies, then it only stands to reason that the United States will need to work more actively and effectively within them to make it so.

An affirmative strategy designed to minimize the likelihood of war does not require increasing U.S. forward presence in the Western Pacific. It entails emphasizing the region's military balance less and acting on its non-military priorities more—transnational crime, illicit resource extraction, climate change, climate-caused security threats, and economic development, for example. Seeking to restore U.S. military superiority would give the appearance of assuming, perhaps mistakenly, that local governments are more fearful of China than they are interested in solving these problems.[216]

U.S. military capability and presence, developed and deployed wisely and with discipline, can enable action on these issues while simultaneously promoting the long-standing and unchanged U.S. interest in peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait and in peaceful resolution of disputes throughout the waters of East Asia. Ongoing support for Taiwan's investment in creative and modern applications of military technology, and for its efforts to increase all-of-society preparedness, will usefully increase the difficulty and cost of any military attack on the people of Taiwan. The United States can similarly encourage regional allies to communicate to China the unprofitability of aggression by being demonstrably prepared to defend their territorial and access interests by investing in their own coastal defense capabilities. And the U.S. Department of Defense can develop the concepts and acquire the tools and platforms that power a dispersed presence, equipped with modern sensing and information technologies and hardened command and control networks. This combined U.S. and allied force profile will provide domain awareness, operational agility with which to respond rapidly to indications and warnings, and mission and asset flexibility without fueling an arms race or being dangerously provocative.

Seeing Things as They Are

Images of competition with China that end with U.S. global dominance restored are illusions. Defeating China will not make the United States a unipolar power again, and that outcome is neither necessary nor sufficient to make Americans prosperous and secure. To the contrary, even if seeking a win ultimately produced one, the United States and the world would be the poorer for it.

The aspiration for an end state in international politics in which most if not all states have representative forms of government has a long intellectual lineage and might, someday, come to pass. In the meantime, the work of U.S. foreign policy is not to rid the world of unrepresentative, illiberal governments. It is to create an international environment in which Americans have opportunity to exercise their talents, to innovate, to grow their national economy, to make progress on solving the world's pressing problems, and to live with the minimum of worry that their country will be attacked. Unipolarity is not the only structural condition under which U.S. citizens can enjoy these freedoms from want and from fear. A strategy that tries to recapture the primacy of the past century, rather than to position the United States to succeed as a great power in the next one, will most likely fail to do either.

U.S. Policy toward China: In Search of a Vision of Victory

By Yun Sun

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Since the beginning of the era of great power competition between the United States and China in 2017, a vision of victory in U.S. policy toward China has been the subject of persistent debate. Most U.S. analysts agree that the United States is in a strategic competition with China, but disagreement runs deep on what a victory looks like. Most agree that competition itself is a process rather than a goal or a means to an end. The question is: What is the end?

Strategists have developed very different visions for the answer. Nicknamed "competition managers" by some Chinese analysts, the Biden administration has been criticized for aiming to "responsibly manage the competition."[217] Some prominent Republicans have singled out China's regime type as the essential problem. They have called for "winning the competition" and for a China "free from communist dictatorship."[218] Yet challenges to that proposition exist even within the Republican Party. In Project 2025, the proposed presidential transition plan drafted by the conservative Heritage Foundation, the China challenge is defined as "rooted in China's strategic culture and not just the Marxism-Leninism of the [Chinese Communist Party], meaning that internal culture and civil society will never deliver a more normative nation."[219] The clear implication is that even if the regime changes, or the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) collapses or is overthrown, it will not solve the challenge that China poses to the United States.

Although China has always presented the United States with challenges and problems since the diplomatic normalization in 1979 (even during the engagement era), strategic competition with China is a relatively new development. The Trump administration is generally seen to have initiated this great power competition, even though the origin and momentum of this contest are deeply rooted in past decades of "engagement" policy. The recency tends to lead to bias and a limited field of vision. As put by historian John Lewis Gaddis, "the direct experience of events isn't necessarily the best path toward understanding them, because your field of vision extends no further than your own immediate senses." He concludes that "the historian of the past is much better off than the participant in the present, from the simple fact of having an expanded horizon."[220]

Gaddis's observation highlights an inconvenient truth: a vision of victory or a theory of success in dealing with a major geopolitical power such as China may ultimately be a matter of ex post facto assessment, rather than an a priori declaration.

If the Cold War Were Comparable

As many strategists have described today's U.S.-China relations as a "new cold war," perhaps the original Cold War could be a historical reference point. A key debate is whether and when the United States decided that the total collapse of the Soviet Union was its goal for victory in the Cold War. George Kennan's "Long Telegram" diagnosed the nature of the Soviet regime, its destructiveness, and its profound sense of insecurity.[221] One could conclude from the "Long Telegram" that regime change, or the "internal change" of the Soviet Union, was Kennan's view of an endgame for U.S. strategy.

But at least two key factors stand out in the assessment of Kennan's view. The first is that Kennan did not prescribe an actively confrontational policy solely aimed at regime change. He did not believe that the United States alone "could exercise a power of life and death over the Communist movement and bring about the early fall of Soviet power in Russia." In fact, he advocated for the United States to "increase enormously the strains under which Soviet policy must operate, to force upon the Kremlin a far greater degree of moderation and circumspection." And the eventual end state would be "either the breakup or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power."[222] From this perspective, the policy toward the Soviet Union was solidly focused on the process of straining the Soviet Union, pushing Moscow back regionally and globally, and actively competing in all domains.

Second, despite Kennan's conclusion, it took two decades of negotiations and testing each other's limits before the United States and the Soviet Union established rules to avoid mutual destruction. The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis itself was not sufficient. It took at least another decade for the United States and the Soviet Union to agree to the rules of their coexistence. It was in the early 1970s that the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to several arrangements, including the Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty and the Agreement on the Prevention of Incidents on and Over the High Seas.

What happened during those two decades and since then is what Kennan called a "test of national quality." This was true for the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War and is equally true for the United States and China today.

A Vision of Victory

Even for those who see the current U.S.-China competition as analogous to the Cold War, it should not be forgotten that the disintegration of the Soviet Union did not eliminate the threat from Russia. It might only have reduced its intensity and scale. Russia may no longer be an existential threat to the United States, but it remains a critical geopolitical challenge, and an acute threat, as demonstrated by the war in Ukraine.

The same is true for China. Given its history, culture, and physical capacity, China will always remain a geopolitical challenge for the United States, regardless of its regime type. Historically, China had been the hegemon in Asia, and the tributary system—China's own version of hegemonic stability—is the only international relations system that China knew and that worked in its favor. Beijing's desire to reclaim its historical primacy in the region is a fundamental cause for its clash with the United States in the western Pacific. China as a nation-state will not, of course, go away; therefore, some type of coexistence with China is almost a given.

China's defeat might be the next-best outcome. The best and most gratifying historical example of this is the defeat of Germany and Japan in World War II. However, that victory was only the beginning of a long process of reforming Germany and Japan and reintegrating them into a global system based on shared values and interests. The defeat was not the endgame—reform and integration were.

However, if the reform and integration of China into the liberal international order is the goal, the theory of victory will look very different. Four decades of engagement since 1979 did not mold China according to the United States' desired economic and political liberalization model. If the diagnosis is that the CCP is the core of the challenge, the vision of victory will have to include an alternative path that will lead to the desired change without jeopardizing China's economic and political stability. If a divided and unstable China is indeed the endgame, this might potentially recreate the situation that the United States faced after the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Pros and Cons

A clearly defined vision of victory offers some advantages. Presumably, it will diminish the space for unending debate on China policy and help to direct the United States' attention and resources in one single strategic direction. From a domestic point of view, it could help forge a national consensus and, to a certain degree—as some would hope—reunite a deeply divided nation through a higher calling to counter a challenge, threat, and adversary that poses a menace to the United States' society and way of being.

Furthermore, once implemented, any clearly defined vision of victory will become self-reinforcing. China will react and, most likely, respond in kind. A hostile strategy, therefore, will lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy and a self-reinforcing security dilemma between the United States and China. This will further strengthen China's nature as a threat, reinforce the national consensus, and lock both countries in a fixed trajectory.

However, a single-dimensional, irreversible, and rigid definition of U.S. strategy toward China could be potentially very costly, especially before Kennan's "test of national quality" renders a concrete, definitive answer about China's strength and resilience. It could run the risk of underestimating China's strength and elasticity, posing a potential overstretch of the United States' resources and capacity. Alternatively, it could overstate the China threat, missing more important priorities and global challenges that could require great power cooperation. Just like it took the United States decades during the Cold War to identify the equilibrium of coexistence with the Soviet Union, it would potentially be premature to declare an endgame in the strategic competition with China.

The China Question

Since 2018, relatively early in the great power competition, Chinese strategists have been complaining about the lack of a clearly defined vision of victory–an endgame–by the United States.[223] In the Chinese narrative, "competition" fundamentally lacks explanatory power in defining the endgame and the cost that the United States is willing to carry for the competition. One prevalent question among Chinese analysts is whether the United States sees strategic competition with China as one of superiority or survival. In these analysts' view, the former offers space and the possibility for coexistence, while the latter equates to an existential rivalry.

China prefers strategic clarity regarding the United States' endgame. This would help China develop, define, and refine its counterstrategy and, at the same time, forge consensus within China's bureaucracy and society. It would help the hardliners eliminate dissenting views in China about the U.S. strategic agenda. If the United States were to adopt a Cold War-like strategy, it would push China to tighten domestic control to counter the U.S. threat for the foreseeable future, as some hardliners have called for.

China's demand for clarity certainly does not require the United States to provide it. Ambiguity might work in the United States' favor. But how Beijing interprets the U.S. debate on China policy should nonetheless be a consideration, as it impacts an important set of dynamics shaping the competition.

Competition as an Imperfect Vision of Victory

The current state of U.S.-China relations is often summarized as "competition." The two countries are engaged in a whole-of-government, extensive, and comprehensive competition in almost every domain. It is a true test of national quality. Victory depends not on the result of one contest, but the sum of the results of all the contests. The endgame is unlikely to transpire in the short or medium term. Furthermore, given the nature of the China challenge, which goes beyond the CCP, an eventual victory is unlikely to be as unambivalent and clear-cut as the disintegration of the Soviet Union. If the United States remains vigilant and seeks to actively compete with China in all relevant domains–diplomatic, informational, military, and economic–while vigorously building up its own capacity and competitiveness, the competition strategy will be both a means to an end as well as the end in itself.

People like to ask what the U.S. endgame with China is. The question underestimates the duration and complexity of the competition between two great powers such as China and the United States. Today is not the endgame—far from it. If history serves as precedent, the United States and China are only at the beginning of the game and likely not even the beginning of the end. Given the nature of the China challenge, which does not only originate from its regime type, it is better strategy to compete vigorously at every corner and in every domain rather than declare a goal that may be premature or self-reinforcing and deny other options and possibilities.

At the End of Strategic Patience

By Akio Takahara

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Should the United States have a specific "vision of victory" for its China policy? This question assumes that the United States is in competition with China. Few would deny that the two countries are in an intensifying strategic competition. The initial question provokes another–does China have a "vision of victory" for its relations with the United States? It does, and the United States should have one, too. The United States and its allies must share a vision of the future in order to win the strategic competition they have been compelled to enter. That is, they must prevent China from changing the status quo by physical or economic force. If China wants to change the rules that support the international order, it should do so according to the rules.

At the same time, when discussing the end goal of the United States' relations with China, a "vision of victory" may not be enough. The reason is simple. The United States is not only *competing* with China. It is also *cooperating* with China, its people, and its companies. There are numerous aspects of the bilateral relationship beyond competition. Discussing only the strategic side will not be enough to understand and envisage the relationship in total. Japan's relations with China provide an example of how the United States might proceed.

Should the United States Have a "Vision of Victory?" China Does.

In explaining China's vision, Japan serves as a productive example. When comparing China's policies toward Japan and toward the United States, it is evident that while China's Japan policy is rather murky, its U.S. policy is quite clear. Beijing has been sending mixed signals to Tokyo for decades. At the November 2023 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, Chinese leader Xi Jinping agreed with Japanese prime minister Kishida Fumio that Japan and China should comprehensively promote mutually beneficial relations with common strategic interests and strive to construct a constructive and stable relationship. A few months later, at the May 2024 trilateral summit with Prime Minister Kishida and President Yoon Suk Yeol of South Korea, Chinese premier Li Qiang offered a proposal for cooperation in the fields of economy, trade, science and technology, and sustainable development, among others. At the same time, however, China pilloried Japan for releasing treated water from the Fukushima-Daiichi nuclear power plant into the Pacific Ocean. To this day, Beijing calls it "contaminated water" and bans the import of seafood products, including freshwater koi. In addition, some Chinese scholars continue to question the international status of Okinawa, over 50 years after the United States returned its administrative authority to Japan. These scholars claim that China never agreed on Okinawa's status since it did not take part in the 1951 San Francisco Peace Conference, which acknowledged Japan's residual sovereignty. Moreover, the Chinese government has not stopped regularly sending its coast guard vessels into the Senakaku Islands' territorial waters and their contiguous zone. All are grave challenges to the international order in Northeast Asia. What, then, is China's Japan policy? Chinese international affairs experts themselves often wonder if China even has one.

This contrasts sharply with China's view of what it wants to do with the United States, the sole superpower. Although the text of China's National Security Strategy for 2021-2025 has not been publicly released, based on the words of Xi Jinping, the strategy is likely designed as part of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s larger goal of becoming a leading world power. It is well known that Xi encourages his people with phrases such as "the East is rising and the West is declining" and "we are advancing towards the center of the world stage." Internally, he has declared, "History indicates a true world power is one that is both a sea power and a land power. . . . It is our important strategic decision to proceed from a land power to a nation that is both a land power and a sea power."[224] Does Xi mean to replace the United States as the hegemonic power and initiate a Pax Sinica? At the least, this is probably not the target for 2025. China knows its national power will not reach that level soon. However, China's intentions grow as its power increases. In 1973, for example, former premier Zhou Enlai did not deny the possibility that China would become hegemonistic in the future.[225] China has actually become more ambitious along with the rise in its national power. Xi Jinping himself told President Barack Obama that the Pacific Ocean was big enough to accommodate both the United States and China. Ten years later, he told President Joe Biden that the *globe* is big enough to accommodate the two. In fact, Xi has a personal liking for standing center stage. In 2018, he told the late prime minister Abe Shinzo that he would have become either a Democrat or a Republican and not a member of the U.S. Communist Party had he been born in the United States, since a politician should aim to stand center stage.[226] Xi knows it's impossible for China to leapfrog the United States in the near future, but his end goal is to eventually win the competition, do away with the global dominance of U.S. forces and the supremacy of the U.S. dollar, and gain power and prestige as the Middle Kingdom. From his remarks and the policies Xi promotes, this would appear to be his "China Dream."

Despite pursuing dominance, China argues for a multicentered world. For example, the recent Resolution of the Third Plenum of the 20th Central Committee of the CCP stated that China calls for an equal and orderly multipolar world. This is especially appealing to many countries in the so-called Global South, where anti-Western sentiments are running high. But what do the Chinese really mean by multipolarity? Judging from the way China exerts pressure on smaller nations via paramilitary vessels and measures of economic coercion, it would appear that, for China, equality exists only among the poles themselves, and not between the poles and other, smaller nations. Despite the modest, friendly language written in leaders' speeches and other policy documents, any potential Pax Sinica seems actually to be a global extension of the Pax Communista, that is, their domestic order as supported by the potent power of the CCP and not by rule of law. Such multipolarity is unacceptable to the great majority of the countries in the world. In order to counter this Chinese vision, and to prevent China from changing the status quo through physical and economic force, the United States must share its "vision for victory" with allied nations, working with them in the pursuit of a common goal.

The maintenance of peace and the preservation of the rule of law may not appear to be a decisive "victory." However, the United States and its partners need to face a reality: what is best for the United States, its allies, and the world is to coexist and cooperate with China where possible, while competing with it fiercely where necessary.

Winning the Strategic Competition Is Not Enough

Preventing China from changing the status quo through physical and economic force does not mean that the United States should wage a new cold war or sever the cooperative ties between the two nations. Rather, the vision of the future should include the possibility of prosperous collaboration in the areas of economics, non-traditional security, and other global issues (e.g., climate change, environmental protection, and global pandemics). But can the United States compete and cooperate at the same time? Japan's experience over the past 15 years offers one potential path to do exactly that.

Komiyama Hiroshi, former president of the University of Tokyo, dubbed Japan an "advanced country in meeting new challenges."[227] Earlier than many other countries, Japan has had to face the challenges of a financial crisis, an aging society, and the fallout from a nuclear power plant accident caused by a tsunami. It has also faced the challenge of China's rise. Needless to say, Japan directly aided China's economic rise and has benefited from it. Although Japan stopped embarking on new official development assistance (ODA) projects to China in 2018, it remains the largest historic donor nation toward China's economic and social development. However, along with the rapid rise in its economic power, China increased its military might. Chinese leaders used to say that they had no intention of building aircraft carriers or of militarizing the South China Sea, but their actions tell a different story. The focus of tension between Japan and China has been the Senkaku Islands. China claimed sovereignty over them for the first time in December 1971 and started printing the Chinese name Diaoyudao (钓鱼岛) on their maps, replacing the islands' Japanese name—Senkaku Islands (尖閣列島) and Uo-tsuri-jima (魚釣島). Although there was a tacit understanding between the two governments that neither side should touch the issue or change the status quo, China began to abrogate its agreement by sending fishing boats (1978), research vessels (1990s), and eventually the Chinese Coast Guard (2008) into the Senkaku Islands' territorial waters. The initial patrol boat intrusion in December 2008 was likely the result of the recently introduced (2006) policy to regularly patrol Chinese maritime interests in the East China Sea. In 2012, when the Japanese government purchased three of the five major islands in the Senkakus from a private landlord with the aim of stabilizing the situation, China seized the opportunity and started consistently sending their patrol boats into the islands' territorial waters and contiguous zone. Japan originally did not think that China would increase its national power such that it would be able to start physically challenging Japan's interests and sovereignty so quickly (if at all). But China's military rise and its maritime advancement eventually posed a serious potential threat, and Japan had no choice but to stand up to this strategic challenge.

Complicating matters, and further increasing strategic tension, Japanese firms were attracted by the growing Chinese market and its appeal as a profitable production site in the increasingly globalized world economy. China overtook the United States as Japan's largest trading partner in 2004 and has remained in that position. As of May 2024, there were over 31,000 Japanese companies registered in China. According to a survey conducted by the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry in China in the spring of 2024, 26 percent of Japanese companies in China consider the country their most important market in 2024 and beyond; another 26 percent declared that the Chinese market was one of their three most important markets.

In response, Japan has adopted a two-pronged approach toward China—compete and cooperate concurrently. This is, in many ways, a seemingly contradictory approach. If one is concerned about security, then Japan should not cooperate with China, since cooperation makes China stronger. But then economic and business experts would counter that if Japan stopped cooperating with China, it would lose the economic vibrancy that constitutes the foundation for the competition itself. Which side is right? Both. And this is Japan's dilemma.

Although the United States is less dependent on the Chinese economy, the situation is roughly analogous; this applies to Europe as well, especially since China began supporting Russia's war effort in Ukraine. China, for its part, is facing the same dilemma in reverse. It is true that striking the right balance between competition and cooperation is increasingly difficult, particularly as it is likely that strategic competition will intensify, while economic, environmental, and cultural cooperation widens and deepens. However, the reality is that people often live with contradictions and dilemmas. Japan has had to live with them in dealing with China for the past 15-plus years. Of course, this is not an easy situation. The world needs to strive, persevere, and maintain peace by mobilizing every means and method possible. Balancing, hedging, communicating for strategic reassurance, and exchanging at all levels in order to promote mutual understanding all require maintaining strategic patience.

Upholding Strategic Patience until When?

But for how long must the United States and the world uphold strategic patience? The answer is until China changes. Much mainstream thinking in the United States today holds that China has not and will not change. However, China and Chinese society have changed enormously in the past 40 years. True, the CCP clings on to (and has even increased) its power and is prone to wield that power forcefully. Likewise, Xi Jinping is reversing the trend of political and administrative reform set by Deng Xiaoping and his friends started in the 1980s. But the path of history is always a zigzag. Xi is desperate to indoctrinate the Chinese people because he knows that the Chinese people have changed, both the elite and ordinary, everyday people. Nobody can shape China from the outside; only the Chinese people can change China. One day the transformation will start, triggered perhaps by a financial crisis or another pandemic. No one knows when the transformation will start, if that process will be peaceful, or what the final end state will be. The United States and other countries could help the Chinese people, perhaps through inviting more students and tourists. Though this path involves myriad risks and challenges, if the internal order of China is eventually transformed into one that is supported by the rule of law, the returns would be high, and there will be a significant, positive change in the nature of the relations between China and the world.

Achieving Victory

By Matt Turpin

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Over the past decade, U.S. policy toward China has shifted from being a somewhat niche topic, covered almost exclusively by a small group of China watchers, to the center stage of debates over national security and foreign policy. Those debates spawn questions such as, does the United States need a specific "vision of victory" for its China policy? And, if it does, what is it? Or, if not, why not? It is tempting to desire a clear and concise end state when crafting policy but doing so would be shortsighted. U.S. policy toward China has been and remains nested within broader national strategies and policies, making it difficult to adopt one specific vision of victory or strategic end state for policy toward China. Such U.S. policy only makes sense within the broader outline of what Americans want the world to look like and what they are willing to sacrifice to achieve it.[228]

This might seem like an unsatisfying answer, but the United States already has a well-developed vision of victory, and that vision has been remarkably consistent for nearly a century. Leaders from across the last fifteen presidential administrations (which implies a considerable degree of support by the American people) believed that U.S. security and prosperity depend on building, expanding, and maintaining an international system that privileges democracies over authoritarian regimes. Whether one calls it a "liberal international order" or a "rules-based international order," the concept is the same. Allowing for a situation to emerge in which the United States is isolated, cut off from foreign markets, and surrounded by more powerful and hostile powers is a disastrous scenario that U.S. strategists and political leaders have been wise to avoid. U.S. policymakers from across the political spectrum largely share the vision that security and prosperity rest on an international environment that is "maximally favorable to the United States, our allies and partners, and the interests and values we share."[229]

In countless speeches and documents over nearly a century, U.S. policymakers have described the attributes of the desired international order. For example, the Biden administration described the challenge facing the United States and their version of the vision of victory in their October 2022 National Security Strategy:

> [T]he post-Cold War era is definitively over and a competition is underway between the major powers to shape what comes next. No nation is better positioned to succeed in this competition than the United States, as long as we work in common cause with those who share our vision of a world that is free, open, secure, and prosperous. This means that the foundational principles of self-determination, territorial integrity, and political independence must be respected, international institutions must be strengthened, countries must be free to determine their own foreign policy choices, information must be allowed to flow freely, universal human rights must be upheld, and the global economy must operate on a level playing field and provide opportunity for all.[230]

The quotation above describes a vision for how the world works, and how Americans want it to work. It observes that the nature of the international order is contested, and it ties U.S. prosperity and security to an international order with particular characteristics. Not every U.S. administration has or will define this international order in precisely the same language, but their descriptions are close enough to view the underlying consensus that Americans have about the world they desire, as well as how that vision differs from the alternative international order that Beijing and Moscow are trying to build.

The embrace of this concept of a "maximally favorable" international order is so ingrained in U.S. strategic culture that it is very difficult to imagine an alternative end state that Americans would be willing to accept (whether Americans are willing to bear the costs to maintain it is a different question). This is the vision of victory or end state that strategists demand an articulation of and from which all subordinate policies and strategies (including U.S. policy toward China) flow.

U.S. strategic culture views alternative international orders based on anti-liberal characteristics (whether built by Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, the Soviet Union, or the People's Republic of China) as threats to be countered, contained, and vanquished.

This begs another question: if the U.S. end state has been so consistent in how Americans define their vision of victory, what accounts for the changes in U.S. policy toward China?

Between the 1970s and the early 2010s, U.S. policymakers largely viewed China as a partner (or potential partner) in achieving broader U.S. objectives, first in helping the United States weaken and isolate the Soviet Union, and later in becoming a "responsible stakeholder" in the international order.[231] As long as U.S. policymakers assumed that China's leaders shared mutual objectives with the United States and that Chinese interests were converging with U.S. interests (or at least as long as Americans thought they could persuade Beijing of these things), U.S. policy sought to accelerate China's economic growth and strengthen the Sino-American partnership.

In the two decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the goal of U.S. policy toward China was to ensure that a potential rival became a strategic partner instead. This was in line with a wider set of bilateral and multilateral policies that sought to turn the world's major powers into partners to be swayed and persuaded, as opposed to rivals to be countered and contained. U.S. policymakers wanted Chinese leaders to succeed with a form of "reform and opening" that fit U.S. interests (whether this was the same "reform and opening" Chinese leaders were pursuing is another matter). As Orville Schell has observed, U.S. policymakers wanted China to become "a little bit more soluble" in the world the United States had built.[232]

Under these conditions, it made little sense for U.S. policymakers to imagine a vision of victory with regard to China policy (aside from the ultimate political liberalization that would come with Beijing's mellowing as its citizens became wealthier and more connected to the rest of the world). This was a relationship that needed to be managed, not a rivalry to be won. If one were to press U.S. policymakers during that time, many would have likely claimed that their objective was to prevent the start of a second cold war.

By the early 2010s, U.S. policymakers could see that Chinese and U.S. interests were diverging, and their objectives were in greater conflict. In response to these developments, U.S. policy became more competitive. The debate today centers around how competitive that policy should be and whether the U.S. should treat the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a rival, or even an adversary, bent on undermining the United States' broader end state of a liberal international order.

By 2022, this change in thinking and policy revealed itself with statements like this from Secretary of State Antony Blinken:

> China is the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it. Beijing's vision would move us away from the universal values that have sustained so much of the world's progress over the past 75 years.[233]

To put it simply, Chinese actions over the past 15 years changed the minds of U.S. policymakers about Chinese intentions.

Where there had once been optimism about "reform and opening," there came to be hardened conclusions that Beijing's vision of victory—the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation—could only be achieved at the expense of the U.S. rules-based order. As the implications of these conclusions sunk in, U.S. administrations shifted U.S. policy away from engagement and partnership with Beijing, and toward rivalry and hostility (an approach that Chinese leaders had already adopted).

From “Partner” to “Rival”

This U.S. vision is not a secret, and for many living in Europe, North America, and parts of Asia, it has become banal. The effort by the United States and its partners to build, expand, and maintain an international order that favors liberal values while disadvantaging authoritarian regimes has been on display for decades. The citizens living within this order take it for granted, with many assuming that its existence is natural, the way things ought to be. But even as some dismiss talk of an international order as empty rhetoric, it is important to consider how this decades-long effort is interpreted in places like Beijing and Moscow, as well as in Pyongyang and Tehran.

The leaders of these regimes have come to view this international order as an existential threat, one that compels them to set aside their differences and cooperate. As far back as Mao Zedong in the 1950s and continuing through to the present, Chinese leaders have interpreted efforts by the United States to bring about democratic reforms as a deceptive tactic meant to weaken and topple the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Known as “peaceful evolution” (a term Mao borrowed from speeches given by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles), the concept is employed by Chinese leaders to explain a long-term U.S. effort to drive the CCP from power.[234]

The fall of the Berlin Wall, revolutions across Eastern Europe, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the collapse of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union turned a vague sense of vulnerability into an acute fear. As South Korea and Taiwan transitioned from authoritarian rule to democracy a pattern started to emerge. The United States and NATO’s war against Serbia fit the pattern. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan fit the pattern. As a series of color revolutions took place in the 2000s and 2010s, leaders in Beijing and Moscow became convinced that all these events were connected: the United States was intentionally causing revolutions (some peaceful, others violent), and it was only a matter of time before the leaders in Beijing and Moscow faced the same fates as Ceauşescu and Gaddafi.

For individuals like Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, the grand strategy of the United States and its vision to build and extend a liberal international order poses an existential threat to their personalized rule. History provides them with stark examples from their predecessors who failed to take seriously the threat posed by the United States. One of the key lessons that their predecessors left is the danger that arises when the United States can take advantage of divisions between China and Russia. From Xi and Putin’s perspectives, the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s sowed the seeds for the Soviet Union’s collapse two decades later. The two leaders understand how critical it is for their two countries to remain aligned. Preventing their own isolation and accentuating divisions between the United States and its allies is vital to their own survival.

It is unlikely that Xi and Putin have set their sights as low as simply survival. Actions and assumptions by leaders in Beijing and Moscow brought about the end of the post-Cold War era, and the United States has entered an era of the second cold war. Both leaders want their nations to flourish and see them resume, what many of their countrymen believe to be, their rightful places at the center of the world stage. The United States stands in the way of those more ambitious visions. Thus, the only way to achieve them, under the leadership of Xi and Putin, is to dismantle what the

United States has built over the past century. Fracturing the U.S.-sponsored international order and replacing it with one that privileges Beijing and Moscow is the only long-term end state that serves the interests and desires of both men. It is clear that if they are successful in creating what they intend, the new international order will be anti-liberal.

Different Chinese and Russian leaders might make different assumptions, different calculations, and different decisions, but for the foreseeable future, the United States will be dealing with Xi and Putin and the regimes they have built. The United States should prevent Xi and Putin from achieving their vision, and it must put considerable pressure on their regimes. That will require a significant increase in U.S. defense spending (and the defense spending of U.S. partners), as well as a realignment of our economies away from both the PRC and Russia (call it de-risking or decoupling, the concept is the same). The United States will need to contain them militarily and isolate them economically. This will require serious upfront sacrifice, as well as prioritizing these efforts over a rapid energy transition that is overly reliant on the PRC. But the United States should be confident that it can build a much more prosperous international system than its rivals can. The United States therefore needs to play for time and wait for leaders to emerge in Beijing and Moscow who will be open to compromise on its terms.

Is the “Steady State” Reaching Its Expiration Date?

By Rick Waters
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George Kennan often lamented that ambiguities in his “Long Telegram” allowed it to be used as the intellectual basis for a global military containment effort he never intended. Kennan thought the Soviets could be defeated by a more calibrated (and less costly) approach. Decades later, he said “My thoughts . . . were distorted by the people who understood it and pursued it exclusively as a military concept, and I think that, as much as any other cause, led to [the] 40 years of unnecessary, fearfully expensive and disoriented process of the Cold War.”[235]

The current ambiguity over the end-state goal of U.S. policy toward China is an impediment to strategy development. Without defined ends, strategy–the application of means to an end–is incomplete and ineffective. Today, wide gaps exist within both Republican and Democratic foreign policy debates over what the desired end state with regard to China should be.[236] To be sure, the lack of a clear answer under the past two administrations did not prevent the U.S. policy pivot to strategic competition under the Trump administration or, under the Biden administration, the reboot of U.S. industrial policy and the profound reshaping of the Indo-Pacific security architecture.[237] But, as with Kennan’s formulation, ambiguity over the theory of victory for U.S.

policy toward China can contribute over time to an environment fertile for strategic incoherence and overreach. This is the case for several reasons.

First, domestic U.S. consensus around a theory of victory is essential to a durable China strategy. What exists in Washington today is more a diagnostic convergence over key aspects of the China challenge than a true bipartisan union around strategy, as the latter requires an alignment of means against clearly defined end goals. Phrases such as "bipartisan consensus" and "malign Chinese behavior" elide over the central question: Does the United States seek to blunt or change China's policies and actions by affecting the leadership's cost calculus or, alternatively, is it the nature of the regime itself that must change before the country's policies will shift? This question matters because the subset of appropriate responses along the policy spectrum will vary between different end-state formulations.

The current administration's answer evolved from Jake Sullivan and Kurt Campbell's 2019 *Foreign Affairs* essay outlining why a steady state was preferable to an end state in the U.S.-China context.[238] This notion implicitly underpinned the 2022 National Security Strategy, Secretary of State Antony Blinken's 2022 speech outlining the Biden administration's China policy, and subsequent speeches from cabinet officials. Yet much of the current administration's answer to what that means revolves around articulating what its China policy is not. For example, in early 2024, Jake Sullivan stated "We expect that the PRC will be a major player on the world stage for the foreseeable future. That means that even as we compete, we have to find ways to live alongside one another. Competition with the PRC does not have to lead to conflict, confrontation, or a new Cold War."[239] This approach made sense as a placeholder while the United States worked to rebuild its domestic strength and fortify key partnerships, but in dodging the end-state question, the policy increasingly catalyzes debate over it.

Some scholars have proposed a regime-based theory of victory as an alternative to a U.S.-defined end state for U.S. policy.[240] This approach has several shortcomings. First, the United States lacks the ability to achieve its goals in most domains without third-country support, and the coalition that would align around a regime-based framing is a solitary one. Second, a successor regime would not necessarily jettison Beijing's broad ambitions unless they lacked the resources and power to do so. The historical record suggests that nearly 80 percent of authoritarian regimes conclude with a depressing end—another regime that pursues similar interests.[241] Third, it is unclear whether ordinary Chinese citizens dislike the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as much as some scholars believe they do, or at least should.[242] In fact, many Chinese people who are dissatisfied with current policies indicate privately that they pin their hopes on the transition to the next generation of CCP leaders who came of age after the Cultural Revolution and in many cases studied abroad—some of whom are quite candid in private about their frustration with the current direction of domestic and external policies.[243]

While a theory of victory could arguably be considered better than no theory, the challenge for the next administration is to articulate a clearer alternative to a steady state, or many will read into the ambiguity of the current formulation that regime change is the ultimate U.S. hope. Raja Krishnamurthi (D-IL) has spoken of an end state in which China's policies moderate, returning Beijing to a greater pragmatism akin to that of Deng Xiaoping.[244] Krishnamurthi admitted that the odds of this happening are not high, meaning the United States must be prepared for a long competition. While the Republican and Democrat co-chairs of the House Select Committee on the CCP found some common ground, the risk in eliding over gaps—especially the lack of a coherent end state—is that prioritization comes to be defined more by which constituencies are loudest than by a clear strategic North Star. Even the House Select Committee name implies that the problem is the CCP, not its policies, creating a perhaps unintended messaging around the motivation behind the 150 bipartisan recommendations it put forward last year.[245]

Second, ambiguity over U.S. end-state goals undercuts coalition-building efforts by allowing third-country suspicions (and the Russia/China "color revolution" narrative) to fill in the blanks. Many abroad suspect that regime change (or its passive cousin, peaceful evolution) remains the secret U.S. intention, or at least that it could become the goal of some future administration. These suspicions shape the context within which third countries consider the choices Washington is asking of them. Although ambiguity over the end state did not prevent the Biden administration from engineering alignment around advanced computing restrictions with the Dutch, Japanese, and South Koreans, new trilateral mechanisms, AUKUS, or the strengthened Quad, it does evoke suspicion, even hesitation. For example, third-country diplomatic colleagues often confide that suspicion of the United States envisioning a regime-change end state sometimes acts as a partially engaged emergency brake, limiting the speed of alignment on coordinated policy responses or providing excuses to hedge in these areas. When it comes to convergence over the "core interests" of the CCP—such as human rights, Taiwan, Hong Kong, or Xinjiang—the impact of this ambiguity is more pronounced, as even like-minded nations balk at tactics (e.g., visa sanctions on Chinese leaders and their families) as going beyond human rights advocacy and into regime delegitimization efforts. Ambiguous formulations complicate U.S. messaging by allowing others—including China itself—to paint U.S. intentions as seeking a "color revolution"—a narrative that appeals to the instincts of autocrats, countries where past U.S. regime change strategies went awry, and to the vast majority of Global South countries who see their interest as staying on the sidelines of a new cold war.

Third, the absence of a clear end state impedes the development of detailed implementation guidance within the executive branch. A sharper end state is a precondition to articulating more robust internal executive branch implementation guidance and prioritization frameworks akin to those that served as the bureaucratic operating system during the Cold War. Key internal National Security Council strategy documents offered robust assessments of the strategic choices facing the United States during the Cold War, the rationale for adopting a specific course of action, and the implications for policies across various domains (including even taxation).[246] No similar strategy documents have emerged regarding the policy toward China.

The national security and defense strategies of two successive administrations as well as key speeches from administration officials offer partial answers to the question of overall strategy (including desired end states) in some domains (particularly Indo-Pacific security), but in other areas discrete tactical decisions (e.g., visa restrictions targeting CCP leaders and their families) often accumulate to give the impression of a strategic regime-change end state, complicating alignment with allies and strategic communications efforts.

Today, the steady state formula is too ambiguous to shape frameworks for evaluating the costs and benefits of policy options or to determine when incentives should be considered versus a mix of solely defensive or punitive measures. An "everything, everywhere, all at once" dynamic sometimes results among the roughly 1,400 parts of the U.S. government which hold some legal or regulatory authority over aspects of China policy.[247] Executive branch structures originally constituted to tackle more straightforward national security challenges—such as bilateral relationships or specific functional issues like counterterrorism or arms control—are often not configured to manage global, multidimensional challenges such as technology competition or to reconcile U.S. objectives across geographic and bureaucratic boundaries. Too often, the tendency is for these individual bureaucratic actors to articulate niche China "strategies" which often become the justification for resource requests or starting points for debates that should more accurately be framed as cost-benefit equations against a cohesive administration policy that could include trade-offs or requests the United States' makes of partner nations. No single Executive Office of the President (EOP) structure can coordinate these debates; the National Security Council, National Economic Council, Office of Science and Technology Policy, Office of Management and Budget, and Office of Legislative Affairs are all peer-equals, reporting (loosely) to the White House chief of staff with little statutory authority over cabinet agencies. Moreover, within the executive branch, there is a dearth of expertise in critical areas (including both Sinologists and technologists), and much of the proprietary external analysis is not shared between agencies. Finally, rotational bureaucracies and political appointee staffing create incentives to prioritize what can be achieved (or avoided) within timeframes of two to three years and disincentivize specialization.

Fourth, China's perception of the debate should also be considered. Regardless of future trendlines, China currently accounts for a quarter of the world's population and a third of global growth, and for over a decade, it has been the world's largest trading nation and the largest bilateral trading partner with most of the world. Many in the senior leadership—including Xi himself—have long believed that the U.S. endgame is regime change, and, as such, there is no middle ground between the two governments. This limits the utility of assurances to the contrary, despite the Biden administration's efforts. Yet former National Security Council deputy senior director for China Rush Doshi and others have spoken eloquently about the role leader-level diplomacy has played in keeping the Chinese leadership from interpreting specific competitive actions (e.g., tech restrictions or new funding for Taiwan's defense) as tactics of regime change rather than as reflections of specific policy concerns.[248] This diplomatic approach has kept the U.S.-China relationship from unravelling as it did in 2020, when channels froze after Covid-19 and parts of the Chinese system convinced themselves that the U.S. military was planning some form of imminent attack.

But the problem of an unarticulated end state goes beyond Xi. Yes, he is the dominant figure now, but China still has politics below his level and he will not live forever. Chinese scholars often say that even *perceptions* of a U.S. regime-change goal feed hardline views within the system and make it more difficult to advocate for moderate perspectives on issues that are subject to debate even under Xi, such as parts of economic and social policy or tactical aspects of China's external policies.[249] These same academics often interpret the phrase "outcompete" in the 2022 National Security Strategy and the word "prevail" in the 2021 Interim National Security Strategy as code for a comprehensive containment strategy aimed at unseating the CCP.[250] Many Chinese contacts saw the shift in U.S. export-control strategy from maintaining a few generations' lead to "maintain[ing] as large of a lead as possible" in foundational technologies as akin to a technology containment strategy meant to deny China's move up the value-added chain.[251] Subsequent assurances that U.S. restrictions would entail merely a "small yard, high fence" achieved little traction as advances in technology frequently force recalibrations of U.S. protection measures.

In the end, nearly every advanced technology is inherently dual-use, and China's current development strategy increasingly centers around dominating advanced technologies, particularly those with offensive or defensive importance and the supply chains that support them. In a sense, China's leaders are right that the United States seeks to block China's ability to achieve its economic and technology ambitions, as both present a threat to U.S. national and economic security objectives. The question is what condition—leadership or policy change—could alter U.S. strategy. If framed around the former, some Chinese scholars claim it becomes more difficult to argue internally for desired U.S. changes, though it is difficult to judge in an increasingly opaque decisionmaking system.[252] Even amid uncertainty, it seems advantageous to reduce the chances that ambiguity around the desired U.S. end state sends strategic signals the United States' does not intend, particularly into a system it does not adequately understand.

As Michael J. Mazarr has written, great power rivalries only truly end in one of three ways: one side collapses or is conquered, one side decides to give up and grants predominance to the other, or both sides agree to transcend the competition and develop a different relationship.[253] Surrender is not a logical national strategy, nor should the United States bet on China's submission or the collapse of the CCP. The remaining approach would be to leave open the theoretical possibility of transcending current dynamics over time, if China makes key policy choices.

A strategic end state requires setting conditions that are achievable at a reasonable cost with the sustained support from the American people and U.S. allies. A China that chooses to regulate its modernization efforts of the People's Liberation Army via transparency and strategic stability discussions, to live within its current borders, to incentivize demand over supply, to rein in industrial policies, to curtail cyber hacking and intellectual property theft, and to keep its law enforcement and influence tactics within the scope of normal state-to-state behavior would offer the United States different policy choices. Whether these shifts are possible under CCP rule or under Xi is unclear—no one really knows what China will look like in a year, much less a decade. Returning the end state focus to policy differences, rather than the nature of the regime, will lend discipline to U.S. tactics and strategy, remove hedging excuses from allies, and perhaps leave oxygen within China for debates over failing strategies that could, over time, moderate as a result of economic constraints or unforeseeable internal political dynamics. This would also avoid the Kennan trap of allowing others to define the end state for the United States.

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Endnotes

1 This paper is a substantially revised and expanded version of an article originally written with Zack Cooper and published in *Foreign Policy*. The basic argument hasn't changed, but the piece has been updated in light of events since its original publication. Zack Cooper and Hal Brands, "America Will Only Win When China's Regime Fails," *Foreign Policy*, March 11, 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/11/america-chinas-regime-fails/.

2 Hal Brands, *The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us About Great-Power Rivalry Today* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).

3 "Event Recap: Secretary Pompeo at Nixon Library," Richard Nixon Foundation, July 29, 2020, https://www.nixonfoundation.org/2020/07/event-recap-secretary-pompeo-nixon-library-2/; "U.S. Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific," National Security Council, January 2021, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf; and Policy Planning Staff, "The Elements of the China Challenge," (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of State, November 2020), https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/20-02832-Elements-of-China-Challenge-508.pdf.

4 "United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China," *U.S. Department of State*, May 20, 2020. https://2017-2021-translations.state.gov/2020/05/20/united-states-strategic-approach-to-the-peoples-republic-of-china/.

5 The clearest articulation of this idea came in an essay written by two top Biden administration officials before they took office in January 2021. Kurt M. Campbell and Jake Sullivan, "Competition without Catastrophe: How America Can Both Challenge and Coexist with China," *Foreign Affairs*, August 1, 2019, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/competition-with-china-catastrophe-sullivan-campbell.

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