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Conflicts Of The Past As Lessons For The Present

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THE GROWTH OF CHINESE POWER AND INFLUENCE

IN THIS ISSUE

GORDON G. CHANG • MICHAEL R. AUSLIN • NIALL FERGUSON

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CONTENTS

MARCH 2019 • ISSUE 57

BACKGROUND ESSAY

China Never Was a Superpower—And It Won't Be One Anytime Soon by Gordon G. Chang

FEATURED COMMENTARY

China's Tide Is High, but Is It at High Tide?"
by Michael R. Auslin

From Trade War to Tech War to Cold War by Niall Ferguson

EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

Discussion Questions



ABOUT THE POSTERS IN THIS ISSUE

Documenting the wartime viewpoints and diverse political sentiments of the twentieth century, the Hoover Institution Library & Archives Poster Collection has more than one hundred thousand posters from around the world and continues to grow. Thirty-three thousand are available online. Posters from the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Russia/Soviet Union, and France predominate, though posters from more than eighty countries are included.

China Never Was a Superpower—And It Won't Be One Anytime Soon

By Gordon G. Chang

“The world by 2049 will be defined by the realization of Chinese power,” write Bradley Thayer and John Friend, referring to the centenary of the founding of the People’s Republic. “China,” these American academics tell us, “will be the world’s greatest economic and political force.”

Must Americans accept the inevitability of Chinese dominance of the international system?

Many say yes, arguing that if this moment is one of geopolitical tension, it is because we are at an end of an abnormal period in history. “After a 200-year hiatus—since the Qing dynasty began to weaken, in the early nineteenth century—China is returning to the world stage as a great power,” wrote Robert Kaplan in the *Atlantic* in 1999. “That may be usual for China, but it is unusual for the West.”

Kaplan, in his piece titled “China: A World Power Again,” maintained that the period of Chinese weakness was an aberration, merely an interlude between natural eras of *tianchao*—Celestial Kingdom—grandeur.

There are many contemporary reasons—contracting economy, collapsing demography, crumbling politics—why Kaplan is wrong and why Beijing’s challenge to America and the international system will almost surely fall short, but history also suggests China’s path to glory is impassable. How so? The current ruler, the bold Xi Jinping, is adopting imperial-era notions that will cut short the rise of the Chinese nation.

As an initial matter, the popular conception of China rests on a gross misreading of the past. The country, in short, has never been dominant on “the world stage,” as Kaplan and others put it. “The idea that China was somehow a great Asian hegemon at some point in the past, so that all she is doing now is resuming her traditional position is a total misunderstanding of how nations in pre-modern Asia interacted,” Arthur Waldron of the University of Pennsylvania told *Strategika*. “Fundamentally, they avoided contact lest that lead to disorder, as globalization is doing in China today.”

Chinese emperors, despite what Kaplan implies, were powerful only within their domains. Moreover, that was true of other East Asian societies. China’s *geliguojia*—“separated country”—system was matched by Japan’s *sakoku*, literally “shackled country,” and Korea’s *swaegug*, “the hermit kingdom.” “Asians did not engage in foreign relations, they avoided them,” Waldron points out.

The recent rise of China, therefore, is not the story of a “return” to glory but more of an emergence from millennia of self-imposed isolation. The Qing dynasty first tried to fend off foreigners and then came to terms with modern ways. Its successor, the Republic of China of Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek, was fatally weakened by an existential struggle with Japan, an Asian society that had embraced the world earlier and more enthusiastically than imperial Chinese rulers had seen fit.



Image credit: Poster Collection, CC 160, Hoover Institution Archives.

Mao Zedong, who chased Chiang off the mainland of Asia to Taiwan, on one level embraced Western ideas with a rhetorical acceptance of Marxism, but he quickly closed off his People's Republic from outside influence. Many spoke of "the Bamboo Curtain," but Mao's barriers were sturdier than that term implies.

China's "rise," therefore, is the result of Mao's eventual successor, Deng Xiaoping, reversing Maoist isolationism by pursuing "reform and opening up" or *gaige kaifang*. Yet Deng rejected something more fundamental: Mao's assertion that he had the right to remake the world in China's image.

Mao's ambitions were boundless. The first leader of the People's Republic of China had hoped to establish "an Earth-management committee in the future to carry out a united planning for the whole Earth." A year after starting the Cultural Revolution, he had even charged assistants with drafting a plan "for the whole humankind." Tellingly, in 1950 he replaced the ritualistic "Long live the central people's government," which had been carved on the Gate of Heavenly Peace in Beijing, with "Long live the grand unity of the people of the world."

"Grand unity" sounds benign, but Mao was evoking *tianxia*, the notion that the world was united and that the Chinese ruled it, presiding over "all under Heaven." This "China Order" concept underpinned two millennia of the imperial system.

Fei-Ling Wang of the Georgia Institute of Technology argues in *The China Order: Centralia, World Empire, and the Nature of Chinese Power* that Chinese society flourished in three brief golden periods: the centuries before Qin Shihuang, considered the first emperor of a unified China; the three-hundred-year Song era, straddling the end of the first millennium; and the period beginning in the late nineteenth century. During these times, society was "politically pluralistic," not dominated by the totalitarian *tianxia* system.

Many would argue that China has also enjoyed a fourth golden era, that begun by Deng. During this time, the Communist Party abandoned its *tianxia*-like goals of reordering the world, embraced the existing Westphalian international order, and thrived while absorbing technology and capital from others.

Deng may have shared Mao's goal for world domination. After all, in 1989 and 1990 he famously issued instructions to Chinese officials to, among other things, "hide our capabilities" and "bide our time." Yet, whatever were his ultimate goals for China, he ruled with much less ambition and far more caution than Mao, as did Deng's chosen successor, Jiang Zemin.

Hu Jintao, who followed Jiang, set his sights slightly higher, invoking *tianxia* by incessantly talking about "harmony." Foreigners, like Kissinger, perceived the emphasis on the word to be a sign that Chinese leaders accepted the world as it was. Yet during Hu's rule, generally coinciding with the first decade of this century, "harmonized" took on sinister overtones, especially inside China, where the *tianxia*-era term came to mean "coerced" and "silenced."

Xi Jinping, Hu's successor, has not been that subtle. He has thrown caution to the wind, making it clear he believes, as did Chinese emperors, that he is the world's only legitimate ruler. Echoes of the worldwide *tianxia* concept are embedded in the slogan for the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, "One World, One Dream." Xi was the Politburo Standing Committee member responsible for the Games.

The Olympic motto, when viewed side by side with Xi Jinping's signature concept, the Chinese Dream, suggests that the aspirations of China's leaders are again all encompassing. Xi's Beijing believes its destiny is to unify humankind, to make, as Georgia Tech's Wang points out, "the China Dream into the World Dream."

Since the Olympics, Xi has employed more direct *tianxia* language. "The Chinese have always held that the world is united and all under Heaven are one family," he declared in his 2017 New Year's Message.

And Xi's underlings have removed all doubt about the revolutionary nature of his message. For instance, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in *Study Times*, the Central Party School newspaper, in September 2017 wrote that Xi Jinping's "thought on diplomacy"—a thought in Communist Party lingo is a body of ideological work—"has

made innovations on and transcended the traditional Western theories of international relations for the past 300 years.” Wang with his time reference is almost certainly pointing to the system of sovereign states established by the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648. His use of “transcended,” consequently, hints that Xi wants a world without sovereigns—or at least no more than one of them.

Xi’s recent comments warn us that he has no intention of living within the current Westphalian system or even adjusting it. His words in this context, therefore, are revolutionary.

It is not a revolution that promises to benefit China, however. Apart from driving away friends—who wants to be Beijing’s subject?—the system Xi contemplates has been tried before with disastrous results. That system, Fei-Ling Wang writes, “has a record of suboptimal performance that features despotic governance, long stagnation of economy, suffocation of science and technology, retardation of spiritual pursuits, irrational allocation of resources, great depreciation of human dignity and life, low and declining living standards for the masses, and mass death and destruction periodically and frequently.”

Xi, following Mao and the emperors before them, is developing what has been described as a modern-day “controlocracy.” Xi demands that the Communist Party have absolute control over society and that he have absolute control over the Party.

Xi’s top-down system is already driving the country in wrong directions. For instance, the motor of China’s rise, the economy, is stumbling in large part because Xi, as Nicholas Lardy of the Peterson Institute for International Economics observes, has placed a greater emphasis on Party control than growth. There are even indications that, due to his policies, the economy is now contracting.

Moreover, Xi’s provocative external policies—a “pervasive flaunting of international norms of governance and trade” as Charles Burton of Brock University told *Strategika*—are a reflection of his *tianxia* mentality. As such, these policies are fast eroding the country’s support in capitals across continents. Xi’s moves to restore what he sees as China’s dominant role in the world are, naturally, convincing others to flee Beijing’s fan club, a trend critical for a China that still depends upon outside support. As Burton states, Xi’s actions are “leading to major internal and external challenges to China’s sustained rise to power.”

Xi has essentially put the entire country in a big red time machine and set the dial to 1950, perhaps 1650. State media may talk about “New China,” but he is busy recreating a Chinese system that history demonstrates did not work well.

So Robert Kaplan may see a China restoring itself to grandeur, but that view is not only a gross misreading of history but also an example of particularly bad forecasting..



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China's Tide Is High, but Is It at High Tide?

By Michael R. Auslin

If China's explosive economic growth since the beginning of reform in 1979 is a unique success story, no less impressive has been the concomitant growth of its military and political power, as well as its global influence. Few could have predicted that within one generation of Richard Nixon's visit to Beijing in 1972, China would vie with the United States for the banner of global leadership. By any measure, China's efforts to surpass American predominance in the world must be taken seriously, and in some cases, may even seem to have succeeded. And yet, at the moment when its tide has reached heights not seen for centuries, Beijing may find its power at high tide, almost certain to recede to some degree.

From a long-term historical perspective, the world is in many ways reverting to a norm that existed centuries ago, when China dominated Asia and influenced trade routes stretching into

Europe. Only for a century and a half or so has China not been a major global power, one whose interests and strengths could be downplayed, even ignored. Pouring its recent national wealth into a powerful military, foreign aid, and political initiatives has returned China to a position of global influence, and set it up for a competition with the United States. From that perspective alone, Beijing has succeeded in at least rivaling America in world opinion as one of only two truly great powers. Nor will China's global position disappear anytime soon.

Consider geoeconomics, specifically the One Belt One Road (OBOR) project. Stretching east and west, north and south over land and maritime routes, OBOR seeks to create a China-based trading and infrastructure network throughout Eurasia and beyond. These are the successors of the ancient Silk Road and Ming Dynasty maritime trade routes. Chinese president Xi Jinping has pledged \$1 trillion in infrastructure development through OBOR, and the project is being hailed as the most ambitious development project since the Marshall Plan, which it exceeds by several orders of magnitude.

Xi has also leapt into the perception gap caused by President Trump's apparent retreat from free trade, claiming for China the mantle of defender of the global trading order. His signature "Made In China 2025" policy aims at overtaking America in advanced technology, from artificial intelligence to 5G networks.

Or take China's hard power buildup. No longer a third-rate military that can barely defend its country's borders, the People's Liberation Army (which includes the navy and air force) is an increasingly sophisticated force able to project maritime power across the globe and contest for air supremacy. The PLA's focus on electronic warfare and antisatellite systems indicates its capability to attack asymmetrically and deny US forces' communications and precision targeting. While largely untested in combat, the PLA far overshadows any other regional force and its numbers and proximity to likely areas of conflict mean that it could bring to bear force that would be difficult for the US military to oppose over a long campaign.

Beijing's economic power and military strength accrue to it political influence around the globe. Its voice is seen as increasingly important in international organizations, and global leaders of all stripes flock to Zhongnanhai for meetings with top Chinese leaders. In the minds of many, there is a de facto "G-2" consisting of the United States and China, which is a sign of how successful Beijing has been in challenging the idea of sole American supremacy in the world.

And yet, for all its success, China faces enormous challenges going forward. While it may have the world's second-largest economy, it is undergoing a significant macroeconomic slowdown, not simply because it is a maturing economy, but because Beijing has failed to institute meaningful reform of state-owned enterprises, and is saddled with endemic malinvestment around the country, a shrinking labor pool thanks to the One Child Policy, pervasive corruption, and the costs of environmental degradation, among others.

Similarly, China's power abroad has also begun to form antibodies in nations worried about their economic or physical security. Beijing's predilection for what is called "debt-trap diplomacy," whereby smaller nations are offered huge development loans that then result in economic subordination to China, is finally drawing resistance from countries ranging from Sri Lanka to Pakistan. There is also skepticism about OBOR's promises of aid, and worries that it will create a closed trading bloc. In security matters, China's threatening behavior has resulted in a Japanese military buildup and more active policy in South and Southeast Asia. Tokyo and New Delhi have grown closer to each other, while smaller Asian nations have reached out to both Washington and Tokyo for closer ties.

Finally, the world is beginning to respond to China's pervasive influence operations, from spying to propaganda. Beijing-funded Confucius Institutes are coming under scrutiny, while European nations are rallying with America against Chinese companies like Huawei, whose ties to the Chinese state are concerning.

China will remain one of the two most-powerful nations in the world for the next generation, perhaps the next century. It will have an intimate effect on global economics and regional security for decades. Yet it is also coming up against the limits of its power and influence. Its development model is stagnating, while its aggressive actions abroad are making nations wary of Beijing's intentions. The cost of doing business, both economic and political, with China has risen dramatically in the past decade, and it is likely that a gradual rebalancing of power away from China will wind up moderating its global influence. Whether that also moderates China's global ambitions remains to be seen.



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A best-selling author, Dr. Auslin's latest book is *The End of the Asian Century: War, Stagnation, and the Risks to the World's Most Dynamic Region* (Yale). He is a longtime contributor to *Wall Street Journal* and *National Review*, and his writings appear in other leading publications, including *Atlantic*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, and *Politico*. Previously, Dr. Auslin was an associate professor of history at Yale University, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, and a visiting professor at the University of Tokyo.



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From Trade War to Tech War to Cold War

By Niall Ferguson

If you had told me thirty years ago America would be in another Cold War with another communist superpower by 2019, I would not have believed you. If you had told me that, simultaneously, socialism would be the height of fashion with young Americans, I would have directed you to a psychiatrist. But here we are. Three decades ago Francis Fukuyama published his seminal essay “The End of History?”, hailing the victory of liberal capitalism over all its ideological competitors, but especially over communism. The essay he needs to write today is “The Upend of History?”

In 2016, a Cold War between the United States and China seemed like the febrile fantasy of Steve Bannon and a few fringe academics. Even Donald Trump’s campaign threats to impose tariffs on Chinese goods

struck me as a throwback to an earlier era. I remember patiently making the counterargument that the incoming Trump administration would be better served by improving relations with China and Russia and making the permanent members of the UN Security Council act like the five great powers after the Congress of Vienna—maintaining a global balance of power.

I had been reading too much Henry Kissinger. I should have listened more to Graham Allison, another Harvard-trained veteran of US national security policy. When he told me he was writing a book on the US-China relationship with the title *Destined for War*, I was incredulous. He was right.

“When a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power,” Allison wrote, “alarm bells should sound: danger ahead. China and the United States are currently on a collision course . . . War between the US and China in the decades ahead is not just possible, but much more likely than currently recognized. Indeed, on the historical record, war is more likely than not.” Since the publication of *Destined for War* two years ago, the world has gone his way. It is as if Allison’s “Thucydides trap”—derived from the ancient Greek historian’s observation that war between Athens and Sparta was inevitable—has a magnetic force, drawing the United States and China towards it.

“What made war inevitable,” wrote Thucydides, “was the growth of Athenian power and the fear this caused in Sparta.” In the space of barely a year, Americans have suddenly grown fearful of the growth of Chinese power. What was once the position of a few alarmists is the new orthodoxy in Washington, shared by Republicans and many Democrats, foreign policy wonks, and technology nerds. We may not be destined for a hot war, but we certainly are on track for a cold one.

In Cold War I, the launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik in 1957 was the moment America woke up to the red menace. I am not sure quite what the Chinese Sputnik moment was—maybe the publication last year of Kai-Fu Lee’s *AI Superpowers: China, Silicon Valley, and the New World Order*. China-bashing is no longer about unfair trade policies and the loss of manufacturing jobs in the Midwest. The trade war that Trump launched against China last year has morphed into a tech war over 5G networks, artificial intelligence, online payments, and even quantum computing. Of course, there is an old-fashioned arms race going on as well,

as China stocks up on missiles capable of sinking aircraft carriers. But that is not what is interesting about Cold War II.

As in Cold War I, the two superpowers are ideologically divided, with President Xi Jinping reasserting the importance of Marxism as the foundation of party ideology even as Trump insists: “America will never be a socialist country.” And, as in Cold War II, both superpowers are seeking to project their economic power overseas.

So what are the big differences? First, China is now a match for America in terms of GDP, whereas the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics never got close. Second, China and America are economically intertwined in what I once called “Chimerica,” whereas US-Soviet trade was minimal. Third, there are hundreds of thousands of Chinese students in America (between 350,000 and 400,000) and 2.3 million Chinese immigrants (half of them naturalized), whereas the number of Soviet citizens in America was always tiny.

Is a new Cold War a bad thing? Not necessarily. It is certainly preferable to our acquiescing in a Chinese world takeover. And the last Cold War was also characterized by massive investments in technology, which had all kinds of positive economic spin-offs. The worst features of the last Cold War were the protracted and bloody proxy wars fought in places such as southeast Asia, Central America, and southern Africa. Right now, there is not much sign of that kind of thing happening again, though watch Venezuela, where the kleptocratic regime of Nicolas Maduro has long depended on Chinese checks but Washington is now backing the opposition leader, Juan Guaido.

Now for the bad news. It was not inevitable that the West would win the last Cold War. And it is far from clear that it’s going to win this one. China seems a more formidable antagonist than the Soviet Union was, demographically, economically, and technologically. For many countries, including staunch US allies such as Australia, Beijing’s economic pull is hard to ignore.

However, I am more worried by America’s enemies within, who are surely much more numerous than during the Cold War. I do not mean the Chinese immigrants, though I fear that in a new Cold War they might have their loyalty called into question, like German-Americans and Japanese-Americans during the world wars. My concern is with those native-born Americans whose antipathy to Trump is leading them in increasingly strange directions.

The vogue for socialism among Democratic voters is one sign of the times. According to a recent Gallup poll, 57% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents view socialism positively, as against 47% who view capitalism positively. The left-wing fire-brand Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has done much to make socialism sexy on Capitol Hill this year. Even more disturbing, because it is much more subtle, is the way her fellow Democratic congresswoman Ilhan Omar, of Minnesota, is making Islamism acceptable. Earlier this year, she and her allies won a significant victory by turning a resolution intended to condemn Omar’s recent

POLL: Are Chinese efforts to surpass American global economic, military, and political power and influence succeeding or failing?

- China’s stability and population soon will guarantee it global supremacy.
- China and America will soon be roughly equal on a variety of fronts.
- America’s Constitution, freedoms, and natural advantages are making it even more globally predominant.
- Corruption, environmental catastrophe, and dictatorship will fatally weaken a declining China.

anti-Semitic remarks into one that also condemned “anti-Muslim discrimination and bigotry against minorities” and deflected the blame for those who “weaponize hate” onto “white supremacists.”

Like her supporters on the Council on American-Islamic Relations, Omar knows that attacking Israel and accusing its American supporters of dual loyalty is an easy way to draw progressives to the Islamist side. It is strange that she has nothing to say about Beijing’s persecution of the Uighurs, a Muslim minority in Xinjiang province, hundreds of thousands of whom are being held in “vocational training centres.” In the old Cold War, such camps were called the gulag.

So what if we reran the Cold War and half the country sided with the enemy? It wouldn’t be the end of history. But it might be the end of liberty.



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Discussion Questions

1. Are Chinese efforts to surpass American global economic, military, and political power and influence succeeding or failing?
2. Are China's neighbors covered by or pushing back on Chinese aggression?
3. Will democratic Australia, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan remain nonnuclear in the immediate future?
4. Does China have any strong allies?
5. Could Russia become useful in containing China's foreign policy agendas?



IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Current US-Israel Relations

Military History in Contemporary Conflict

As the very name of Hoover Institution attests, military history lies at the very core of our dedication to the study of “War, Revolution, and Peace.” Indeed, the precise mission statement of the Hoover Institution includes the following promise: “The overall mission of this Institution is, from its records, to recall the voice of experience against the making of war, and by the study of these records and their publication, to recall man’s endeavors to make and preserve peace, and to sustain for America the safeguards of the American way of life.” From its origins as a library and archive, the Hoover Institution has evolved into one of the foremost research centers in the world for policy formation and pragmatic analysis. It is with this tradition in mind, that the “Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict” has set its agenda—reaffirming the Hoover Institution’s dedication to historical research in light of contemporary challenges, and in particular, reinvigorating the national study of military history as an asset to foster and enhance our national security. By bringing together a diverse group of distinguished military historians, security analysts, and military veterans and practitioners, the working group seeks to examine the conflicts of the past as critical lessons for the present.

Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict

The Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict examines how knowledge of past military operations can influence contemporary public-policy decisions concerning current conflicts. The careful study of military history offers a way of analyzing modern war and peace that is often underappreciated in this age of technological determinism. Yet the result leads to a more in-depth and dispassionate understanding of contemporary wars, one that explains how particular military successes and failures of the past can be often germane, sometimes misunderstood, or occasionally irrelevant in the context of the present.

Strategika

Strategika is a journal that analyzes ongoing issues of national security in light of conflicts of the past—the efforts of the Military History Working Group of historians, analysts, and military personnel focusing on military history and contemporary conflict. Our board of scholars shares no ideological consensus other than a general acknowledgment that human nature is largely unchanging. Consequently, the study of past wars can offer us tragic guidance about present conflicts—a preferable approach to the more popular therapeutic assumption that contemporary efforts to ensure the perfectibility of mankind eventually will lead to eternal peace. New technologies, methodologies, and protocols come and go; the larger tactical and strategic assumptions that guide them remain mostly the same—a fact discernable only through the study of history.



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