



The Substructures of Chinese Grand Strategy, and Why Resolute US International Engagement Matters

Christopher A. Ford

At the time of writing, it has been nearly seven years since the Trump administration officially reoriented US national security policy toward great-power competition. The 2017 National Security Strategy, for instance, spoke candidly about “the revisionist powers of China and Russia,” which seek “to shape a world antithetical to US values and interests,”¹ and the 2018 National Defense Strategy proclaimed vividly that “inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in US national security.”²

The threats that drove this shift had been building for many years, but it is worth remembering how recently this reorientation occurred. As recently as 2015, for instance, despite its own clearly growing worries about Chinese threats—as expressed, for example, in the “Pivot to Asia,”³ later awkwardly rebranded as a “rebalance”⁴—the Obama administration was still promoting the transfer to China of sophisticated US nuclear power generation technology.⁵

By 2018, however, the Trump administration had begun its own “rebalance” of sorts, reversing the Obama administration’s permissiveness regarding technology transfers and indeed beginning a technology-denial campaign intended to slow Beijing’s progress as a strategic competitor, starting with cutting back on the aforementioned civil-nuclear technology sharing,⁶ and quickly moving more broadly into the imposition of national security export controls⁷ on trade with China, such as on the export of semiconductor technology.⁸ At the same time, efforts kicked into high gear to try to bring more semiconductor manufacturing back to the United States after years of sectoral decline.⁹

Rather than have this shift into competitive technology strategy, and strategic competition more broadly, tossed out by the Biden administration in a fit of partisan enthusiasm,

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moreover, Washington thereafter doubled down on some aspects of it in ways that make clear that strategic competition is today a bipartisan “new normal” in the US policy community.¹⁰ The Biden administration actually *expanded* restrictions on semiconductor-related technology transfer to China, for instance¹¹—and has done so repeatedly¹²—and it has made clear that it is on this path not merely in order to maintain a “relative” lead over Beijing in technology applications but in fact to ensure “as large of a lead as possible.”¹³ With the 2022 National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy, the Biden administration has also made clear that it considers China to be “America’s most consequential geopolitical challenge,”¹⁴ the “pacing challenge” for the entire US defense establishment.¹⁵

Meanwhile, despite more recent problems overcoming partisan congressional obstacles to actually *funding* such initiatives,¹⁶ our legislature has made clear—for example, with the establishment of a new China Select Committee in the House of Representatives¹⁷ and with the CHIPS (Creating Helpful Incentives to Produce Semiconductors) and Science Act of 2022¹⁸—that technology competition remains a bipartisan priority. Furthermore, far from the Obama administration’s willingness to transfer US nuclear technology to China in ways that benefited Beijing’s nuclear-powered submarine program,¹⁹ the Biden administration is now pursuing the ambitious AUKUS trilateral technology-sharing and technology-development program with the United Kingdom and Australia, which will include providing nuclear-powered submarines to the latter.²⁰

This focus on competitive challenges with China and with Russia is, if anything, becoming even more acute in the strategic nuclear realm, with Russia busily developing a new generation of exotic strategic nuclear delivery systems²¹ and China now expanding its nuclear arsenal at a furious rate—to the point that by 2035 it is likely to have an arsenal of a size comparable to our own (and that of Russia).²² As the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review observes, “By the 2030s the United States will, for the first time in its history, face two major nuclear powers as strategic competitors and potential adversaries. This will create new stresses on stability and new challenges for deterrence, assurance, arms control.”²³ As US leaders face this new era, wrestle with its implications, and seek to develop, implement, and *maintain* an effective competitive strategy in response to these challenges, it is important to be both forthright and clear about the nature of the problem we face.

This paper seeks to help provide—or at least crystallize—some of what is needed, offering a reasonably concise account of America’s “China challenge.” Specifically, it will offer the author’s take on four closely related, sequential points: (1) the motivational structure that seems to be behind China’s grand strategy; (2) the strategic vision (a.k.a. desired strategic end state) toward which that strategy orients itself; (3) the means by which China aims to *achieve* that strategic vision; and (4) why Americans—and, frankly, all other sovereign peoples who prize their political autonomy and independence within a rules-based international order—should care about these questions.

Together, these four elements provide a sort of foundational substructure for national competitive strategy. They help us understand what the competitive adversary is trying to achieve

and how it intends to do so, as well as how *deeply* that adversary cares about that objective (and hence the degree to which it will prioritize that objective vis-à-vis other goals), and why we should care about devising ways to defeat that strategic vision. Such an understanding of the adversary's mindset is thus fundamental to strategy, and it is this author's hope that a clearly articulable account of these interrelated elements will assist us in meeting the challenges ahead.

OUR POLICY INFLECTION POINT

Honesty and clarity about the challenges we face are especially important in a time in which our domestic political discourse is so divided and polarized as to make sustained attention to competitive strategy dangerously difficult. For some Americans today, there seems to be a temptation to conclude that we can safely, even profitably, retreat from engagement with the international community. In this view, we should simply mind our own national business and not particularly concern ourselves with what is going on elsewhere.

After all, this is what we did back in the nineteenth century, when it was in many ways *British* geopolitical power and influence that helped provide a backbone for the international order in which our young commercial republic grew and thrived—including the Royal Navy muscle that effectively enforced our own national security policy (articulated in the Monroe Doctrine) in favor of protecting the sovereign autonomy of the countries of Latin America against European imperialism. Such isolationism is also what we at least tried to do once more, in the 1930s, as clouds rose and boiled on the geopolitical horizon in both Europe and East Asia.

The present author, however, is emphatically *not* one of the people who think that way, and the discussion hereinafter of China and its strategic ambitions tries to explain why. Hopefully it will also make clear that a steely-eyed and heavily security-focused approach to resolute and continuing internationalism is not merely *consistent* with our interests as a people proud of our American values and of our American traditions as a self-respecting sovereign nation but also actually *essential* to them.

MOTIVATIONAL STRUCTURE: A TALE OF PRIDE AND EMPIRE

Understanding the motivational structure behind China's grand strategy is in many ways remarkably easy. The author has covered this material in two books on China, but with a little simplification for the sake of clarity, it can be quickly explained as a parable of pride, of fall, and of a hunger for restoration.²⁴ It is the tale of a proud empire that conceived of itself as a civilization-state at the natural apex of the human universe but that, in its arrogant condescension toward all others, encountered a brash, younger civilization from far away, which proved far more dynamic and resilient, and which outclassed and pushed around that old one in a great many ways. This painful encounter produced a long period of perceived humiliation, in which the bruised self-regard of that ancient empire calcified into a prickly insecurity combined with a desperate desire to reassert itself. By eventually humbling those who were felt to have

humbled it, that antique imperium hoped to “restore” itself to a position in the world of the politically, socially, and culturally hegemonic sort that it flattered itself it had always enjoyed in the past—and that it *deserved* to have—as the center of the world.

That kingdom conceiving of itself as deserving to be considered the center of the world, of course, is China. And this tale is the story of China’s encounter with Western civilization from the mid-nineteenth century onward. The idea of China’s “return” to a global status appropriate to its ancient image of itself is the idea expressed by the current leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—including chairman-for-life Xi Jinping—as that of China’s “national rejuvenation,” but this is most emphatically *not* just a CCP conception.

Indeed, the morality play of this story has become baked into Chinese nationalist thinking, obsessing Chinese nationalists from the era of Liang Qichao and Sun Yat-Sen through the Maoist period—though during Mao Zedong’s years it was expressed more in terms of “revolutionary” Marxist leadership than Sinic civilizational supremacy—and on to the present day. This dream of geopolitical restoration seems to cut across the Chinese political spectrum, for not even reformist liberals in China appear to have been immune to such aspirations, with many over the years seeming to prize such reform not for its own sake (e.g., because political liberty and the democratic accountability of national leaders to their people are inherently good) but rather because they felt that democratization was how China would be able to become powerful and respected once again. (The most powerful and successful countries in the world were democracies, it was sometimes reasoned—at least in years past—so if China wanted to be powerful and successful, it needed to democratize.) In this view, democratic self-governance was seen less as a per se good for the Chinese people than as something merely instrumental: the tool by which China would recover the power and status it deserved.²⁵

The idea that preeminent global status is China’s birthright, and that it was robbed of that birthright by malevolent foreign powers, has run like a seam of rich ore—or perhaps like a backbone—through Chinese nationalist political thinking for generations. This provides a powerful motivational structure for grand strategy.

STRATEGIC VISION: A DREAM OF CENTRALITY

To be sure, it would be one thing if this vision of “national rejuvenation” simply meant that China’s leaders wish the Chinese people to become wealthy and prosperous. This is what CCP officials often try to suggest to foreigners, of course, and—if this were true—who would begrudge it? After all, surely every country wants that for itself.

Unfortunately, however, the situation is much more challenging than that. China seems to long for not just wealth, prosperity, and global respect but in fact also power and status relative to the rest of the world. Its leaders seek, in other words, zero-sum *positional* advantage: to “restore”—for that is how Chinese nationalists see it—China’s relative position vis-à-vis all others at the top of the global status hierarchy. This is about restoring the look and feel, as it were, of what China believes its ancient relationship with the rest of humanity to have been

centuries ago when it began thinking of itself as the “Middle Kingdom” (Zhongguo). This phrasing is well known in the West, but we sometimes forget that they meant this not merely in the geographic or cartographic sense but also in a *civilizational* and *political* one: the term signifies status centrality, with China as the figurative hub around which the rest of the human world is felt to revolve.

The future world desired by China’s CCP leadership, Chinese nationalists, and even some democracy protesters, in other words, is a profoundly Sinocentric one.²⁶ To be sure, this strategic vision is *not* predatory vis-à-vis the rest of the world in a crude, brutalizing Nazi or Soviet sense. Thankfully, this is not about carving out lebensraum for the Chinese people through the displacement or slaughter of other populations, and it is not about seeking to establish Communist puppet states as Joseph Stalin did in Eastern Europe.

Yet China’s vision is nonetheless both *imperialist* and *hegemonist* in its fundamentals. In effect, it seeks to build a world in which all others look to CCP-ruled Beijing as a dutiful man in the Confucian tradition might be expected to look to his clan patriarch for wisdom and guidance—generally living his own life, but always understanding that he is part of a social hierarchy in which he must treat that patriarch with ritualized respect and defer to that patriarch on matters of importance.

This is a Sinocentric vision of a world that Beijing does not exactly rule, therefore, but in which it clearly *dominates*: a system of global order in which conforming with Beijing’s desires and expectations is the key indicium of international legitimacy and propriety.²⁷ In effect, it is a vision in which the rest of the human community has been trained to show China the sort of respectful deference it feels itself to deserve.

TOOLS OF STRATEGY: THE TECHNOLOGIES OF POWER

A more comprehensive treatment of just *how* China aims to achieve its strategic vision—that is, to bring about its desired strategic end state—is beyond the scope of this paper, and the reader must look elsewhere to find more about how Beijing seems to have been trying to build this future Sinocentric world.²⁸ To simplify, however, one of the key “technologies of power” in this respect is what might be referred to as “leverage webs.”²⁹ In short, Beijing deliberately builds and maintains networks of relationships characterized by dependency on China, which it thereafter employs by using them to apply or withhold rewards and punishments in ways that are designed to “train” people into habits of appropriately deferential and accommodating behavior.³⁰

The most obvious example of this practice is inside China, with the so-called social credit system that CCP officials have been working to build and elaborate for the surveillance and control of Chinese citizens. The conceptual analogy here is a Western financial “credit score”—that is, the numerical rating that most of us have, based on records of our past economic behavior in things such as borrowing money and repaying loans, by which would-be creditors are able to judge us as good (or bad) credit risks.³¹

In China, they have been working to expand this concept from financial credit into other areas, including broad questions of deemed *sociopolitical* merit, including the soundness of one's political views and social activity (as interpreted, naturally, by the CCP). Just as someone in the West with a bad credit history will have trouble taking out more loans, in theory—and more and more in reality, as the system is gradually elaborated—a Chinese citizen whom the party deems to be *politically* untrustworthy is likely to have increased difficulty in doing everyday things such as engaging in domestic air travel, gaining admission to a good school, or (yes) getting loans.

The point is in part to punish things the CCP deems undesirable, of course, but the *bigger* point is to place everyone on notice that their sociopolitical behavior is being monitored by party authorities, and to create an incentive structure such that ordinary Chinese gradually learn to conform their behavior to party expectations. This is about training conformity.

Indeed, this kind of “social credit” thinking also lies behind—albeit in far less explicit ways—China's increasing involvement in using economic, trade, financial, and political relationships with those outside China to train the world into conformity with CCP expectations. In effect, the CCP is trying to expand the “leverage webs” it uses to enforce such expectations to the rest of the world, such as by exporting an embryonic version of its domestic censorship abroad,³² so that foreign individuals,³³ companies,³⁴ celebrities,³⁵ law firms,³⁶ and even entire countries³⁷ that dare even to say anything the CCP finds distasteful will find themselves subjected to Chinese economic pressures. (At the same time, those who toe Beijing's line will be more likely to receive benefits and preferences: trading relationships, diplomatic favors, pandas for their zoos, or whatever.)

Over time, the theory seems to be, the rest of the world will gradually come to internalize the norms implied in such incentive structures, understanding that doing that of which the CCP approves is likely to be profitable, and that of which it *disapproves* painful and costly. Apply such incentives long enough, it is hoped, and doing what the party believes to be the right thing will become habitual; it might even come to feel *natural*.

This is a conception of social order and control—applied not just in domestic society but, increasingly, on the world stage—that ought to be very familiar to those who know something of the Confucian tradition. In that tradition, social order is fundamentally dependent on all participants understanding the duties and expectations inherent to each of their varied positions in the system. (A son must understand the duties and expectations of a son, for instance, the father those of a father, and so on.)

In a properly “harmonious” Confucian society, each person understands the responsibilities attached to his or her particular role and conforms to them. Indeed, ideally, each even *internalizes* those expectations, accepting them as inevitable and appropriate, and finding it all but inconceivable to act otherwise. This is not exactly domination through fear, though it certainly does not shy from *inducing* fear in the course of properly “training” everyone into conformity, but it aspires to more: it aims to make docile obedience seem natural, to the point of becoming almost a reflex.

That is merely its aspiration, of course. China's CCP rulers may well prove too heavy-handed and paranoid to truly succeed in making conformity with their wishes feel genuinely natural. Nonetheless, this is the dream of social order on which much of party rule is based, and seeing this can help us make sense of much of China's international behavior as well. CCP leaders for years have talked of how they aim to build a "harmonious world"³⁸ modeled on the "harmonious society" they claim to have built in China itself.³⁹ (This disturbingly totalitarian global ambition is not merely an inference, by the way. They have actually *said* they want to create a new world order modeled on China's own domestic politics: "The concept of a 'harmonious world' is an extension of . . . domestic policy into the arena of foreign relations.")⁴⁰ Under Xi Jinping, such thinking is now more often articulated under the vague and clunky rubric of a "community with a shared future for mankind," but this is nonetheless what is meant.⁴¹

Whatever else it might be, a "community with a shared future for mankind" is clearly intended to be a "harmonious" future in the dark sense in which suppressed Chinese dissidents sometimes refer to themselves as having been "harmonized."⁴² This approach is grounded in "a fairly sophisticated conception of how to influence populations into desired patterns of behavior by shaping their incentive structures so as to rely as much as possible upon autonomous choices, rather than upon issuing specific commands," and it is fundamentally a philosophy of trained docility within a Sinocentric framework.⁴³ *Our* collective docility, and *their* framework.

WHY WE MUST CARE: THE STAKES IN PLAY

So why does this all matter? To some extent, much of the point is presumably already obvious: this Sinocentric vision makes claims against the political autonomy of all the other sovereign peoples of the world, claims that they could not accept while yet retaining the sovereign autonomy recognized by the existing rules-based international order.⁴⁴ If that liberty is important to them, therefore, they must perforce resist the CCP's Sinocentric vision.

To further sharpen the point, it is worth making clear what CCP leaders such as Xi Jinping mean, in discussing China's economic and technological strategy, when they speak about the importance of seizing for China the commanding heights of a "Fourth Industrial Revolution."⁴⁵ As Xi sees things, seizing "first-mover" advantage in this coming Fourth Industrial Revolution is the key to China's "national rejuvenation."

The reader will recall the parable recounted earlier about an arrogant old empire that felt humiliatingly bested by a brash, younger civilization. In that tale, the brashness and extraordinary power and dynamism of those newcomers—specifically, the European imperialists who began pushing China around in the nineteenth century—were made possible by the *First* Industrial Revolution, during which steam-powered machines and modern science had revolutionized industrial and productive activity in Britain and several other European countries (and thereafter Japan as well).⁴⁶

This is painfully remembered, and for years was all but fetishized, by Chinese officials.⁴⁷ They also believe that it was the *Second* and *Third* Industrial Revolutions—built around the technologies and techniques of mass industrial production⁴⁸ and information technology,⁴⁹ respectively—that similarly supercharged US power in the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Chinese strategists feel that, in all three cases, the power that seized “first-mover” advantage in these industrial revolutions also seized for itself pole position in an associated “revolution in military affairs” (RMA).⁵⁰ The economic dynamism and technological sophistication of each industrial revolution, combined with the associated military innovations of each RMA, gave these “first movers” the power to reshape the entire international system around themselves: first Britain, and then America.

In this conception, China’s vision is of a stunningly ambitious project of world-building. The People’s Republic of China has dedicated itself to seizing the geopolitical and technological “commanding heights”⁵¹ of first-mover advantage in a Fourth Industrial Revolution that it feels will give rise, in turn, to a new RMA—what Xi Jinping terms “a new global military revolution.”⁵² Together, it is hoped, these will permit China to fashion a new global order around itself: a new Sinocentric system.

As we grapple with ourselves here in the United States over America’s future role in and willingness to engage with the world, therefore, we need to understand that *these* are the stakes. When people talk about the “rules-based international order” that has been supported and sustained by American power and internationalist engagement for the last eight decades, they mean one in which sovereign peoples—including our own—exist as sovereign peoples alongside each other.⁵³

Such countries are not all of equal power, wealth, sophistication, or influence, of course, just as individual people are not thus in everyday society. But they exist (and coexist), in a sense, *horizontally* more than they do *vertically* in the international system. This is the “horizontality” of sovereign peoples dealing with each other as juridical equals, not entirely unlike how ordinary citizens do in a democracy.

One of the key aspects of today’s rules-based international order is that it aspires to ensure and preserve just that sort of openness and fundamentally democratic horizontality as the core architectural feature of international society. No society entirely lives up to its own highest ideals all the time, of course. Just as the guiding values of a democracy provide a source of guidance for ongoing evaluation and course correction over time when facts on the ground there fall short of the ideal, however, so the value system of structural horizontality provides the rules-based international order a constant sense of orientation and purpose that reminds us that this order is fundamentally about protecting the freedom and autonomy of sovereign peoples.⁵⁴

It is this core devotion to sovereignty and autonomy that helped the international community climb out of an earlier era of imperialist domination by providing a discourse with which to critique and debunk the self-aggrandizing claims of European imperialists by throwing their

own values back in their face—thereby helping the postcolonial nations of the world achieve their independence. And it is this devotion to sovereignty and autonomy that has been the rules-based international order’s secret to making political liberty and market-based economic prosperity possible for so much of the world for so long.

By contrast, the alternative vision in play here is—as we have seen—not one of sovereign autonomy and political and economic freedom but rather one of deferential social hierarchy in which China sits at the top of the totem pole.⁵⁵ It is not horizontal but instead *vertical*, and it is at its core imperialist.

Such Sinocentrism may not be an “unfree” system in the old Soviet sense about which we worried during the Cold War, therefore, but it is quite unfree all the same. One can have enormous respect and admiration for the achievements of Chinese culture over the many centuries of its existence and its flourishing—as indeed does this author—but one cannot gainsay that this Sinocentric conception is an imperialist vision that no one who belongs to a proudly sovereign people should accept. The value system of the rules-based order helped the world bring to a close an earlier era of European imperialist domination, and fidelity to it remains international society’s key to avoiding another such era, this time under China’s thumb.

CONCLUSION

Accordingly, when Americans toy with the idea of trying to put behind them the difficult and often perplexing challenges of international engagement—perhaps hoping to leave to others the messy problems of geopolitical revisionism presented by countries such as China and Russia—they need to remember the Sinocentric strategic vision to which a US return to isolationism would help give free rein in the world. Whether they are developing approaches to handling the “three-body problem” of strategic deterrence with two “near-peer” adversaries, building strategies for technology competition, improving domestic science and technology education, sustaining a robust level of defense spending, developing diplomatic engagement and partner capacity-building opportunities in the Global South, reassuring and helping build up our allies, or engaging in any number of other tasks, US leaders need to bear in mind the nature and the importance of the strategic competition challenge we face.

The same, moreover, can be said of the American people as a whole, especially this year as they exercise their precious right to choose their political leadership. Grand strategy requires consistent focus and sense of direction that is really only possible, over time, with clarity of vision. This paper has tried to offer a compelling account of that vision through the prism of strategic competition with China.

In today’s divided and polarized times perhaps more than ever, we have need of such clarity. The United States has long been deeply engaged in international affairs, but this is not because we are congenital meddlers, nor because our policy processes have been captured by pernicious elites. It is, instead, because *these issues matter*. They matter for the liberty and sovereignty of all peoples, not least our own. Americans forget that at our peril.

NOTES

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



CHRISTOPHER A. FORD

Dr. Christopher A. Ford, visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution, is professor of international relations and strategic studies at Missouri State University's Graduate School of Defense and Strategic Studies. He was previously US assistant secretary of state for international security and nonproliferation and special assistant to the president and senior director for weapons of mass destruction and counterproliferation at the National Security Council.

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434 Galvez Mall
Stanford, CA 94305 6003
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1399 New York Avenue NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005
202 760 3200

