



Countering China's Global Great Game

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The relationship between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) changed more in 2020 than in the past forty years. Cooperation and "win-win outcomes" rapidly devolved into confrontation and "wolf warrior diplomacy." Preexisting disputes over human rights and escalating tariffs were already eroding Washington's decades-long China policy before the outbreak of the pandemic, but the bilateral relationship worsened appreciably last year with China's crackdown on Hong Kong and America's decertification of the city's autonomy, not to mention the COVID-19 pandemic. As former National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien put it, "The days of American passivity and naivety regarding the People's Republic of China are over."

Initially, the Trump administration pushed a policy of reciprocity with the PRC, singling out unequal trade terms and China's theft of intellectual property. What came next, however, was a redefining of the relationship. Beginning in 2019, Washington's critique of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) fundamentally shifted from a question of fairness to an accusation of malevolence. As then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo put it in October of that year, "Today, we're finally realizing the degree to which the Chinese Communist Party is truly hostile to the United States and our values, and its worse deeds and words and how they impact us." Indeed, Pompeo's subsequent remarks at the Nixon Presidential Library heralded what could be a new era in U.S.-China relations—one animated by deep distrust. The onset of COVID-19 in 2020 accelerated this strategic shift. China's initial concealing of the virus' existence and subsequent stonewalling information-sharing, its attempts to profit off stockpiled personal protective equipment, and its blatant disinformation campaigns about the virus' origin fed a retributive zeitgeist to "make China pay" for its coronavirus culpability.

This impulse prompted policymakers to fixate on China's past behavior at the expense of shaping the CCP's future choices. The result: bad policy ideas defined the debate and hamstringed America's new approach to China right out of the gate. As President Joe Biden and his advisors craft a new China policy, heeding these warnings is critical to building a truly competitive strategy vis-à-vis the CCP.

Consider last year's push to strip China of sovereign immunity in U.S. courts. Allowing Americans to sue the PRC for pandemic damages is quintessentially populist, but woefully unserious. Doing so would have required new legislation from Congress—which several members enthusiastically introduced—and would almost certainly have been challenged in the Supreme Court for a simple reason: it would upend centuries of international law, and quite possibly the concepts of foreign direct investment and multinational corporations.

In some cases, these bad ideas also sabotaged good efforts. Take "decoupling," the 2020 buzzword among China hands. While Washington tried to reorient supply chains away from China, some members of Congress also called for the United States to leave the World Trade Organization—a move which President Donald Trump supported. These initiatives worked at cross purposes with each other. The former sought to decouple the international trading system from China, while the latter policy would have decoupled the United States from global commercial institutions. Taken in isolation, reshaping supply chains has a great deal of merit, and several members of Congress introduced legislation that would extricate critical industries like rare earth minerals and pharmaceuticals from Beijing's influence. But walking away from the rules and institutions that underpin global commerce would send mixed messages to Beijing and America's partners.

This reactive posture predated COVID-19—from threatening to delist PRC companies on U.S. securities exchanges and targeting Confucius Institutes to prosecuting intellectual property theft and sanctioning human rights violators. To be sure, these initiatives are worthy endeavors, even necessary ones. And the political leaders pushing them deserve credit for rejecting the outdated, naïve belief that engaging China economically would change China politically. Even so, no strategic logic ties these new ideas together. Henry Kissinger cautioned against this danger in his 1994 magnum opus, *Diplomacy*: "[A]ny pragmatic policy – indeed, especially a pragmatic policy – must be based on some fixed principle in order to prevent tactical skill from dissipating into a random thrashing about." In other words, an "edit-undo" approach to America's relationship with the CCP is unserious and insufficient apart from a broader competitive plan. For Kissinger, that broader plan was engaging China. Policymakers today are rejecting that paradigm, but chipping away at the outcomes of a failed policy without a theory of victory guarantees defeat.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, America sat atop the global power hierarchy as the world's undisputed hegemon. This status, while enviable, has actually crippled the ability of policymakers to think proactively about national security. To wit, grand strategy in the United States is generally taught and practiced as a rote three-step progression: define vital interests, identify threats to those interests, and mobilize national resources to defend interests and mitigate threats. This process has conditioned the United States to be highly reactive, jumping from one crisis to the next. To a degree, this is unavoidable for a hegemon that, by definition, has everything to lose and little left to gain. Thus, the strategic flow begins with risk instead of reward.

Conversely, aspiring global powers approach strategy from a different starting point: relatively little to lose, and much to gain. But, in most cases, force-on-force comparisons are simply unfeasible, so revisionists like the PRC naturally look for asymmetric vulnerabilities in their adversaries. China's construction of artificial atolls throughout the South China Sea encapsulates this indirect approach to competition: salami-slicing its way into its neighbors' exclusive economic zones, and establishing facts on the ground that the likes of Vietnam, the Philippines, and others were unable to challenge. By the time the Pentagon raised the issue and Congress sounded the alarm, it was too late. This was by design. Instead of looking at strategy through a defensive prism, the CCP is competing creatively and offensively, beginning the strategic process through the prism of exploiting the hegemon's vulnerabilities and accentuating its own competitive advantages.

This perspective is woefully underappreciated in Washington today. Academics and practitioners regularly lock horns over why America and China are at odds—the former pointing to global power imbalances and the latter emphasizing antipodal ideologies. Lost in this debate is the equally important question of how Washington is competing with Beijing. The current nationalist-globalist dispute within U.S. domestic politics misses this point entirely because the dichotomy takes place within a preexisting strategy bent toward the defensive. Oscillating, or “thrashing about,” between Trumpian unilateralism and President Biden's multilateralism will not change this predisposition.

Even a wholesale repudiation of “the end of history” creed won't save America. Yes, foolish triumphalism predisposed Washington to be reactionary, even lazy, after the Cold War's dissolution. Today, Washington finds itself once again reentering an era of “great power competition,” and the United States needs to accept this reality. But humility alone cannot change the way Americans think about security. Only a conscious bipartisan effort to practice strategy differently will increase America's competitiveness vis-à-vis China.

Unfortunately for the United States, the PRC has thought deeply about competition for decades, culminating in Xi Jinping's “community of common destiny”—diplomatic speak for China's plan to wreck Washington's alliance networks and attract erstwhile U.S. partners into its own orbit. But the real danger of Xi's vision is its intent to supplant Western values of freedom and democracy as ordering principles of international relations. According to the scholar Nadège Rolland, “the CCP would undoubtedly not bring Western conceptions of universal values and human rights into the mix.” At the center of China's vision for a new world is the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative, now known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—Xi's signature foreign policy project and the CCP's blueprint to displace the United States as global hegemon.

Often described as a twenty-first-century “Marshall Plan,” the BRI is China's vision for revitalizing the old Silk Roads of antiquity and integrating the Eurasian landmass into a common economic market. The initial concept for the BRI consisted of a land “belt” stretching from China to Europe, with various routes passing through Russia, Central Asia, Southwest Asia, and the Middle East, and a maritime “road” linking Southeast Asia to the West. Over the past six years, however, the BRI has come to encapsulate far more than a Eurasian project. Digital, Polar, and Space Silk Roads, as well as BRI-branded projects throughout Africa and as far afield as Latin America, intimate a broader strategy in Beijing. The BRI is Xi Jinping's method and message of China's march toward global hegemony. As such, its success is nonnegotiable for the CCP.

Geopolitically, a top BRI priority is securing land routes to the Indian Ocean, via Pakistan and Burma, and bypassing the Strait of Malacca and flanking India. Of related importance is China's ability to secure a foothold in the Gulf of Thailand—specifically in Cambodia—which would preposition the People's Liberation Army to neutralize Thailand and Vietnam in the event of a South China Sea dispute. It could also hamper the ability of the U.S. Fifth and Seventh Fleets to mobilize in a crisis scenario in the Indian Ocean. More broadly, China uses its financial influence from the BRI to shape the foreign policy alignment of countries around the world by leveraging generous investment offers to push its One China principle, thereby isolating Taiwan and raising the political cost to America of defending the island nation.

It is no accident that these objectives jeopardize two of Washington's vital interests: protecting sea lines of communication and preventing the emergence of a Eurasian hegemon. Moreover, it is little consolation that China's funding for Belt and Road projects has declined in recent years. True, the COVID-19 pandemic has placed significant financial stress on partner nations and has, in several cases, constrained their ability to service their BRI loans. But even if the CCP accomplishes just a fraction of its plans, a partially-completed BRI could still succeed in upending the balance of power throughout Eurasia. Indeed, the entire project echoes the nineteenth-century “Great Game” between Britain and Russia, wherein the two powers sparred for control of Central and South Asia.

But China has an additional objective: establishing unfettered maritime access for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) throughout Eurasia. This ambition mirrors—and disputes—the historical role of the U.S. Navy as the global guarantor of international trade. To be sure, China is wholly inadequate to displace America in this role, but it is certainly looking to guarantee its own energy imports. Moreover, as the plan moves beyond the defense of its near-abroad to regular patrols in the Persian Gulf and the Eastern Mediterranean, the full scope of the BRI's multi-domain challenge to American influence will come into focus.

This challenge is already materializing in the Pacific. While the United States works to renegotiate its compact agreements with Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands, China is pouring investments into the region and funding port construction that, conveniently, could service PLAN visits.

But, again, the BRI's true challenge to the United States exceeds geopolitics. In the words of Dan Tobin of the Center for Strategic & International Studies,

The challenge Beijing represents is not to Washington's status in Asia, but to the nature of the global order's predominant values, and the vehicle for that challenge is an effort to build both the physical and intellectual infrastructure underpinning the next phases of globalization.

Chinese authorities sought to deflect these concerns when they rebranded the project from OBOR to BRI. As Angela Stanzel of the European Council on Foreign Relations has put it, this “make[s] it sound more like an inclusive initiative rather than a strategy.” Nonetheless, the BRI is a deliberate strategy, and it presents global problems for the U.S.-led order that demand a global response.

Thus far, however, America's response to the BRI has failed to see the forest through the trees. Perhaps most notably, the United States has now established a public-private project—the Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development (BUILD) Act—to compete dollar-for-dollar with Chinese capital abroad, while also pooling resources with Japan and Australia via the Blue Dot Network to fund these projects and also rate the quality of Chinese loans. To be sure, both objectives are commendable, and the United States has met with some success in steering nations like Burma away from BRI loans. And, to the former administration's credit, it raised serious concerns about the BRI at the outset of President Trump's term. But the BUILD Act and Blue Dot Network represent slightly different methods of whack-a-mole—merely reacting to discrete Belt and Road projects whenever or wherever they arise. Biden's more recent proposal for democracies to stand up a full-fledged alternative to the BRI suggests that the current administration may be on the verge of repeating these mistakes. What Washington really needs is to look past one-off infrastructure investments, recognize China's larger gambit with the BRI, and target the initiative's macro-structure. Doing so will require policymakers to dust off decades-old strategic tools that served America well in its most recent bout with totalitarianism, but have since fallen into disrepair.

During the Cold War, the existential stakes of protracted competition with the Soviet Union—namely, the specter of nuclear Armageddon—forced the United States to practice strategy like its life depended on it. Practically, this meant rejecting a top-down approach to strategy and, effectively, learning how to compete once again like a hungry young power. Instead of adopting a defensive posture, U.S. strategists honed the craft of identifying America's asymmetric strengths and exploiting the Soviet Union's strategic weaknesses.

This process took decades to perfect, largely because relearning the art of strategy is difficult enough for one person, let alone an entire bureaucracy and political elite. Andrew Marshall, the venerable Cold War strategist, summarized this challenge in 1990:

The process of justifying expenditures as counters to Soviet expenditures conditioned U.S. actions on Soviet strengths, expressed as threats, not on Soviet weaknesses and constraints. We had a war strategy—a catastrophic spasm—but no plan about how to compete with the Soviet Union over the long term.

That catastrophic spasm is once again evident in America's response to the CCP. But, thanks to Marshall and the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment, which he led for many years, Washington now has a blueprint to follow: net assessment and competitive strategy.

Net assessments identify an adversary's vulnerabilities; competitive strategies exploit them. According to Marshall, three questions guide this process: what game is the United States playing, what game is its adversary playing, and what are their relative strengths and weaknesses? During the latter half of the Cold War, this framework empowered policymakers to move past *détente* and actually compete with the Soviet Union by capitalizing on America's unique advantages over the Soviets—namely, its free political system, market economy, and technological edge.

In other words, the United States practiced strategy as a bottom-up exercise, not only as a top-down endeavor. To be sure, the United States still responded to Soviet movements and stratagems throughout the Cold War, just as the Soviets responded to American decisions. But the reaction was tied to a larger competitive rubric. Caught in an existential tussle with the Soviets, policymakers in Washington had no choice but to compete on dual planes that simultaneously defended their core interests while also understanding, and sabotaging, Moscow's game. Instead of thrashing about, the United States acted deliberately, baiting the Kremlin into decisions that favored Washington's strengths.

Today, however, it is China that is baiting America, and the BRI is a textbook example. Washington's instinctual response to compete with the Belt and Road dollar-for-dollar is a losing proposition that plays into China's long game. But with an offensive framework, American policymakers could turn the tables and transform the BRI into an albatross for the Communist Party, for the massive project has multiple flanks that Washington has so far left untouched. The BRI is intrinsically connected to the systemic human rights abuses of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang because half of its land routes run through the territory and over the backs of oppressed minorities. Economically, meanwhile, the Belt and Road relies on corruption—and, in large part, the U.S. dollar—to grease the skids of construction. And militarily, its global scope could quickly overextend the People's Liberation Army.

Each of these openings stems from weaknesses that are particular to the PRC and its ruling Communist Party. China has adeptly exploited America's strategic complacency, but its brittle political system, totalitarian ideology, and fear of its own people all serve to complicate the BRI. The entire plan has multiple weaknesses at key nodes that, if pushed, could jeopardize the entire project. By harnessing the tools of net assessment and competitive strategies, U.S. policymakers could initiate targeted campaigns to exploit these vulnerabilities, atrocities, and illicit activities, and sabotage China's "Great Game," one step at a time.

Whether the Biden administration is willing to compete at this level, though, is uncertain. While Biden has publicly eschewed any characterization of the U.S.-China relationship as another Cold War, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan has nonetheless written about the importance of competitive strategies: "Sometimes, the answer is not to try to solve the problem created by others, but rather to make others contend with realities created for them." This task, while difficult and protracted, is indispensable for the preservation of American leadership in this century.

Equally important for the Biden administration will be reckoning with shifting alliance networks. By all accounts, transatlantic unity was at a nadir mere months ago in the wake of Brussels' rushed investment agreement with Beijing that ignored the concerns of incoming Biden staff. In the past year, through border aggression with India and an economic embargo targeting Australia, China has sought to isolate these partners. Thus far, Biden has accounted for these fluctuations and taken solid steps to forge a multilateral response to the CCP. Even so, Washington must begin to compete proactively if it hopes to preserve its global standing and derail Beijing's strategic ambitions. Formulating a serious plan to counter China's Belt and Road represents a very good place to start.

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