Since 2012, the eminent Athenian general Thucydides, whose somber account of the Peloponnesian War among the leading Greek city states of the fifth century BCE has long been respected as a foundational text of both history and international relations theory, has attained instant name recognition in global public discourse. In August that year the Harvard academic Graham Allison, who was previously best known for his study of decision-making during the October 1962 Cuban missile crisis between the United States and the Soviet Union, published the first of a series of op-eds and articles, which were ultimately expanded into a bestselling book, that argued that the chances of outright war between two great powers, the United States, the current global hegemon, and the People’s Republic of China (PRC), a rising and ambitious rival for world supremacy, were uncomfortably high. In doing so, Allison drew on the analogy between the current international configuration of power and the situation among the Greek city-states two and a half millennia ago, when a military and political alliance centered upon land-based Sparta faced a growing challenge from a grouping headed by rival Athens, a rising maritime contender for regional dominance. In particular, he cited one famous sentence from Thucydides’s account of the origins of the Peloponnesian War: “It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this inspired in Sparta that made war inevitable.” As he expanded his original insight, Allison argued that in twelve out of sixteen historical cases when a rising power threatened the position of an established dominant power, war had resulted. Fundamentally, Allison argued, the United States and China needed to negotiate their relationship so that they could avoid this fate.

Thucydides’s narrative and the insights it provides have long been a seminal text for classicists, historians, and international relations scholars. Given the intellectual sophistication and high literary quality of Thucydides’s account of the Peloponnesian War, not to mention the scarcity of other surviving sources, historians, classicists, and theorists of...
international relations have maintained a steady level of interest in his presentation of the conflict and the lessons to be drawn from it. Even so, he was hardly the hottest of topics. The new prominence of Allison’s interpretation of the writings of Thucydides, who has suddenly achieved rock star-status as a prescient public intellectual, the founding father of the realist school of international relations, author of a magisterial study offering permanent insight into the workings of a balance of power at the global level, has prompted an upsurge of popular and scholarly interest alike in both the man and his legacy.

The term “Thucydides trap” soon became shorthand among top policymakers and the general public alike for the theory that a military confrontation between the United States and China was inevitable, an outcome that most stressed they were determined to avoid. President Xi Jinping of China and U.S. President Barack Obama both cast doubt on the validity of this outlook, stressing that in any case, this was one trap into which their two countries would not fall. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger emulated Xi Jinping in warning that, though Allison’s predictions might become a self-fulfilling prophesy, there was nothing inevitable about such a conflict. Other Western critics were equally skeptical, expressing their reservations at length in influential media outlets. Prominent Chinese scholars queried whether the expectation of a Sino-American war was intellectually sound, highlighting in particular the complexity of Thucydides’s multi-level analysis of the causes of the Peloponnesian War, which highlighted not simply the broad structural strains related to the ambitions of a rising power, but also the dynamics of alliance politics on both sides, together with the incautious and uncompromising “mentality of leaders, political elites and the public in both Athens and Sparta.” They also pointed out that at all these levels the relationship between the two Greek polities in the fifth century BCE was significantly different from that between the United States and China in the early twenty-first century.

References to the “Thucydides trap” nonetheless continue to abound at the highest levels of the diplomatic sphere. Early in 2017, Allison paid a visit to the Trump White House, to meet with National Security Council officials. Former Defense Secretary James Mattis was reputedly deeply familiar with Thucydides’s writings, as was President Donald Trump’s former national security adviser, H. R. McMaster. In September 2019, at a reception in New York hosted by the National Committee on US-China Relations and the US-China Business Council, two well-connected American non-governmental organizations with a long history of seeking to serve as intermediaries smoothing the path of Sino-American relations, Wang Yi, China’s Foreign Minister, stated that the two countries were still mutually interdependent, even though “some people are using every means to depict China as a major adversary, marketing their prophecy that the relationship is doomed to fall into the Thucydides Trap, the Clash of Civilizations Trap, and even clamor for a full ‘decoupling’ with China.” Published with the imprimatur of the official China Daily, his words undoubtedly represented the then current Chinese party line. Wang also referenced the earlier writings of an equally influential Harvard academic, Samuel P. Huntington, published in 1993, shortly after the end of the Cold War, which predicted that the future international system would be dominated by a

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7 Ling and Lv, “Why Are China and the U.S. Not Destined to Fall into the ‘Thucydides’ Trap?’” 500-514, quotation from 504.


civilizational and cultural “clash” between “the West and the rest,” including an “East Asian economic bloc . . . centered on China.”

Allison’s invocation of Thucydides provoked a massive upsurge of interest in both the works of Thucydides himself and the applicability or otherwise of lessons derived from them to the current international situation, especially what is seen as growing competition between China and the United States. This essay focuses in part upon an article that is itself a review of three works offering multi-faceted insights into the thinking, reliability, and impact of this long-dead historian of a conflict that ended over twenty-five centuries ago. Jonathan Kirshner’s review of Allison’s work, plus two other major works on Thucydides, provides an opportunity for a wide-ranging assessment of Thucydides’s views on the conduct of international affairs and issues related to war and peace. The Oxford Handbook of Thucydides is a compilation of forty essays by scholars from various disciplines that explore numerous intellectual aspects of Thucydides’s writing and thought, including the historical reliability of his narrative, his impact upon political theory, including that of international relations, and his approach to such themes as national character, the role of emotion in policymaking, and the role and nature of leadership. The political theorist S. N. Jaffe, who contributed a chapter emphasizing the significance of both regime type and domestic politics in The Peloponnesian War, has also written a longer study of Thucydides’s handling of the outbreak of war, which Kirshner likewise reviews here. All suggest that Thucydides has numerous lessons for the current era, many of them less than reassuring, insights that recent months have rather uncomfortably underlined.

The second work scrutinized here is a collection of essays by seventeen scholars which address the theme of Sino-U.S. rivalry and the potential power transition involved. It is the product of a three-year research project. “Understanding China’s Rise through the eyes of Chinese IR Scholars,” based at Griffith University in Australia and funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Several authors hold positions in leading universities in mainland China; others are based in Australia, the United States, Canada, Taiwan, and Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. In fourteen chapters, they take a wide variety of perspectives toward the rise of Chinese power in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond; whether or not this represents a threat to United States interests; if and how the United States should respond to this potential challenge; and whether conflict or at least bitter rivalry between these two powers should be anticipated. Huiyun Feng and Kei He, the two Australian academics who coordinated this project, seek to assess precisely how China challenges the existing multidimensional international order. They analyze this in terms of “three levels of international order: norm-based order, power-based order, and rules-based order, as well as three domains of international order: security order, political order, and economic order.” Overall, they “conclude that China’s challenges to international order are more uncertain and difficult than widely perceived” (4). Nuanced, subtle, and three years in the making, this anthology was published in early 2020, but in some respects events, notably developments in Hong Kong since May 2019 and their fall-out in Taiwan, compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic that took hold in China in January 2020 and has since spread throughout most of the world, have already overtaken the volume’s findings.


Kirshner’s evaluation of Allison’s *Destined for War* is far from complimentary. Emulating the well-known writer Ian Buruma’s complaints in *The New Yorker*,14 he lambasts Allison’s work as simplistic, marred not just by misinterpretations of Thucydides’s analysis of the causes of the Peloponnesian War but also by major misreadings of the Greek historian’s work. “It is not simply that Allison misuses Thucydides, forcibly attempting to shoehorn selections of *The Peloponnesian War* into the service of an ill-fitting argument; astonishingly, *Destined for War* also repeatedly gets Thucydides wrong—fundamentally and consequently wrong.” (13) Among the errors he cites are Allison’s claims that neither Athens nor Sparta wished for war and that leaders on both sides tried to avoid it, a significant misrepresentation of Thucydides’s account of the coming of war. As Kirshner points out, according to the Greek historian: “Both sides preferred war to peace” (15).Kirshner is equally critical of Allison’s subsequent analysis of sixteen historical cases in which rising powers have confronted an existing hegemon, twelve of which have resulted in war. The one to which Allison devotes by far the most attention is that of Britain and Germany before World War I, an analogy that Kirshner considers questionable. Even more strained, in his view, is Allison’s “mislead[ing]” presentation of the causes of the Pacific War between Japan and the United States that began in December 1941 as comparable to those of the Peloponnesian War, both of which involved the imposition of economic sanctions by one state upon another, but under very different circumstances. Indeed: “Allison’s treatment of prominent cases like US-Japan raise [sic] serious doubts about the utility of conclusions he might reach on the basis of these episodes” (20).

Allison’s choice of case studies is indeed somewhat problematic. He purportedly builds on the insights of a famed historian into the origins of a conflict that convulsed a relatively small area of southeastern Europe and western Asia. Without wishing to dispute the intellectual and literary qualities of Thucydides’s work, it is worth asking whether a relatively small-scale regional conflict among jealous neighbors is entirely analogous to the current global rivalry between China and the United States. Allison’s remaining case studies are largely drawn from the European international system from the fifteenth century onward, with guest appearances by the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the United States, Japan, and Soviet Russia from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries onward. The only genuinely non-European case included is Japan’s drive in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to win predominance over both China and Russia. The Eurocentric bias of these selections leaves one wondering whether studies of a more geographically and temporally diverse set of cases, for example, the lengthy contests for political and economic mastery among assorted Eurasian powers, the lengthy Roman rivalry with Persia, or intra-Asian battles for power and resources, might offer comparably useful or perhaps even more fruitful analogies.

Several authors of chapters in *China’s Challenges and International Order Transition* are equally critical of the validity of Allison’s analysis, his choice of case studies, and his interpretation of these. Steve Chan of the University of Colorado at Boulder questions Allison’s selection of examples to support his hypothesis, notably the omission of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and the Spanish-American War of 1898, and likewise argues that in both World War I and World War II, Germany’s prime target was Russia rather than Great Britain. Indeed, he inquires: “Why would a rapidly rising power want to start a war against a declining hegemon? If the incumbent hegemon is still strong, this upstart should wait” (33). He argues that, rather than war necessarily occurring “because of the aggressive policies of a cocky and overconfident rising power,” conflict “can also be initiated by an insecure and desperate declining power (or one that sees itself poised to decline) determined to prevent a prospective power transition” (35). A hegemon may even resort to war to enhance its dominance. Chan also accurately notes that war can be the cause of power shifts, leaving defeated states unable to maintain their former position in the existing international order. Such was the fate of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire after World War I. Power transitions often, Chan suggests, occur peacefully, without the outbreak of war. While warning that such predictions as that of the supposed Thucydides’s trap may well become self-fulfilling prophesies, Chan argues further that theorists “overlook the importance of agency in explaining wars” (41). He also highlights continuing disparities.

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in military, economic, and ideational power between China and the United States, with the latter still far surpassing its putative rival in these measures.\(^{15}\)

David A. Welch of the University of Waterloo is equally skeptical of China’s ability to challenge the United States and dictate the rules of the international system. Contending that “realists have misread and misappropriated Thucydides” (49), he points to structural limits on Chinese economic growth, and argues that China has only fifteen to twenty years of expansion ahead before massive demographic problems undercut its trajectory. Moreover: “Every economic hegemon in recorded history has been among the wealthiest powers in the world per capita. China is not.” (53) Militarily, China still, he contends, lags well behind the United States. In addition, a hegemon needs to provide a sense of vision and commitment to which other states can subscribe and buy in, something that China, which lacks any real soft power, cannot offer. Other countries are indeed highly suspicious of China. Welch views China as “transactional, non-ideological, and pragmatic” (61), with no clear revisionist agenda and “a strong . . . interest in a stable, predictable, functional world-order” (66). Even so, given levels of uncertainty in the Asia-Pacific region, he believes it possible that a crisis between the United States and China could provoke a "spiral of suspicion and hostility" that—not least because of the pervasiveness of the metaphor drawn however inaccurately from Thucydides—could lead both countries to spiral into war.\(^{16}\)

It is often argued that, although China may not be able to dominate the world, it may well soon attain—if it has not done so already—hegemonic power in its neighboring Indo-Pacific or Asia-Pacific region. Indeed, many Chinese scholars and others argue that in this area at least China will effectively restore the “Tianxia” (everything under heaven) tributary system of the Ming and much of the Qing eras. T. V. Paul of McGill University casts doubt upon these expectations, arguing that even such limited “[h]egemony requires material and normative strengths and there is deficiency in both respects as to what China can offer” (72). He points out that other states in the region are unlikely to prove cooperative in assisting China to regain a past dominance they often resented or opposed, especially given the presence of India, another major rising power which has serious unresolved conflicts with China. Major contradictions exists between China’s purported embrace of a renewed Tianxia system and its embrace of an extreme Westphalian model which opposes all outside intervention in the affairs of other states. He also notes growing domestic opposition among China’s neighbors to its targeting of their economic resources and its “heavy-handed extraction” (84) of these. In Paul’s view: “The anticipation is that secondary states and other great powers will accept Chinese hegemony in return for economic and security rewards. This is based on a skewed historical rationale and a blind application of the old patterns to the contemporary era, in particular by the Chinese elite” (93).

Although until recently the administration of President Donald Trump has in some respects facilitated China’s growing strength, China is nonetheless plagued by a “legitimacy deficit” (90) and has over-invested in precarious ventures and locales. Paul anticipates that China, together with India, Japan, and the United States, will be one of four major powers in the Asia-Pacific region, where he expects numerous small crises are likely to arise. Yet overall, Paul predicts: “Despite some successes, China faces formidable obstacles in transforming raw power to hegemonic power.” (89) Other Asia-Pacific states are adept at balancing and using international institutions to protect themselves, and in most, nationalism is a strong force, often compelling significant push-back against Chinese demands.\(^{17}\)

Feng Liu, a professor of international relations at Tsinghua University, seeks to offer a reassuring picture of China’s likely trajectory as a rising power. Arguing that war is “not the optimal choice” for either his own country or the United States “to

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15 Steve Chan, “China and Thucydides’s Trap,” in China’s Challenges and International Order Transition, eds. Feng and He, 27-46.

16 David A. Welch, “China, the United States, and Thucydides’s Trap,” in China’s Challenges and International Order Transition, eds. Feng and He, 47-70.

solve their conflicts and complete the power transition” (95), he criticizes the Thucydides Trap theory. Liu points out that China, as a rising continental power, albeit one with ever expanding naval and other military forces, is more akin to Sparta than to rising maritime Athens. He seeks to minimize the degree of threat that China poses to the United States, suggesting that China is still much inferior in overall strength to the United States, and that China offers only regional rather than global competition to its rival. Liu argues that “blind expansionism” (113) and overstretch would jeopardize continuing Chinese economic development, which constitutes the foundation of the Chinese Communist Party’s hold on power. Although China is rising, it is integrated into the existing order, from which it benefits, and will therefore push only for “mild reform” (113).

While admitting the possibility of strategic confrontations and economic competition in Asia, Liu contends that an “intimate mutual economic reliance” characterizes the Sino-American relationship, making outright conflict less likely. Liu’s optimism is tempered; he anticipates “more friction” (115) in future and believes that it is still “open” (116) whether war will be the ultimate outcome of the growing regional transition of power from the United States to China. He believes that “the two powers must strive to manage crises and risks” (115) so as to avoid conflict escalation in fraught situations. In an effort to alleviate American fears, Liu states that “China has not shown a strong desire to dominate the world, despite its rise. Furthermore, the United States’ East Asian alliance system has formed a strong external containment on China in different issue areas. Therefore, the threat of China’s rise to the United States’ dominant position is not as great as imagined.” (114)

Other contributors to this volume are likewise skeptical as to just how successful China will be in establishing regional dominance in the Asia-Pacific area. Two Singapore-based scholars, Mingjiang Li and Xue Gong of Nanyang Technological University’s S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, argue that China’s much-touted Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) “will, to some extent, help increase Chinese economic influence in the region, further deepen the divisions within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), create slightly stronger constraints on ASEAN’s regional strategic and security role, and intensify major power rivalry in Southeast Asia.” More specifically, “China will be able to make some changes in the regional norms regarding trade and economic openness and to some extent transform the regional power-based order in Beijing’s favor.” Yet at least “[i]n the short and medium term,” they believe “the BRI is unlikely to result in a China-centric regional order and Beijing will not be able to significantly transform the strategic order in Southeast Asia.” (118) Domestic politics and security concerns, including significant uneasiness over the prospect of growing Chinese dominance and military power, are in their view likely to lead many states in the region to limit their exposure to China. “In general, almost all regional states are interested in safeguarding their foreign policy autonomy while working with China economically.”

Increasingly, Chinese and Asian scholars are highlighting the “Tianxia” system whereby China purportedly for centuries exercised benign regional dominance over its neighbors as an innovative concept in International Relations (IR) theory which challenges the existing Western schools of realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Some commentators, including Mark Beeson of the University of Western Australia, contend that the central place of these approaches and indeed of such well-publicized concepts as the Thucydides Trap itself reflects the degree to which the ideational norms and expectations of global intellectual dialogue are still dominated by ideas and discourses that reflect Western perspectives and agendas and were created to justify and shore up a Western-centric outlook. For many Chinese and Asian theorists, the repudiation or replacement of this framework by one whose architecture reflects thinking based on what are perceived as Asian traditions


19 Mingjiang Li and Xue Gong, “China’s Belt and Road Initiative: How Will It Change the Regional Order in Southeast Asia?” in China’s Challenges and International Order Transition, eds. Feng and He, 117-138.

20 Mark Beeson, “Ideas, Institutions, and Interests: What’s at Stake in the ‘Decline of the West’?” in China’s Challenges and International Order Transition, eds. Feng and He, 161-180.
of government and international dealings can therefore function as an affirmation of non-Western and by implication more authentic Asian values, a new mindset supposedly rooted in past experiences and practices as opposed to one imported from elsewhere. As Yuan-kang Wang of Western Michigan University states, "power is critical to creation, maintenance, and change of international order. When the balance of power undergirding an international order shifts away from the hegemon, a revised order will emerge to update the reality of power" (142). He expects the current power transition between the United States and China to bring changes in the existing rules, predicting that China will "continue following the rules that benefit its interests and revising those that do not" (157). He believes that China is likely to bolster the existing open global trade system, while rejecting "the political components of the liberal order centered on democracy and human rights" (158). Beeson, too, thinks it "only a question of time ... before East Asia becomes a Chinese 'sphere of influence' in much the same way that the United States has exercised a proprietorial attitude toward the American continent" (180).

Predicting how Chinese power might operate in practice is a major preoccupation of several contributors to this volume. Jisheng Sun, vice president at China's Foreign Affairs University in Beijing, offers a rather roseate view of the exercise of Tianxia, past and present. Highlighting this system's emphasis upon harmony and diversity, she suggests that "China's traditional values and ideas might ... push [the international order] to evolve into a more peaceful, cooperative, and tolerant one through reaching the objective of building a human community with a shared future" (203). Chih-yu Shih of National Taiwan University offers a rather more nuanced evaluation of the operating principles of Tianxia, and notes how in practice its exercise often enables China to exclude certain controversial topics—Taiwan, Tibet, or territorial disputes—from the international agenda. Shih also differentiates between "autonomous" or idealistic Tianxia, which focuses on harmonious coexistence between sometimes opposing groups and concepts, and "hegemonic" or interventionist Tianxia, which prioritizes the interests of Chinese citizens and China's own territory over those of outsiders. In reality, he suggests, Chinese policy "trap[s] others in its vicious cycle of squeeze and compromise." (199) The disconnect between theory and practice of Tianxia is one major reason why "China's image is better in Latin America and Africa than in Asia, where neighbors clearly see insincerity, complain about arbitrariness" (200), and resent China's failure to make concessions to meet their own concerns and wishes. Illuminatingly, in this volume's final chapter, Xiaoyu Pu of the University of Nevada at Reno points out that in practice, coercive military power normally underpinned China's exercise of Tianxia, observing that "when China was strong, the constraints of any pacifist culture were limited, and China's rulers typically pursued an offensive strategy. ... The historical records indicate that we should not overestimate the impact of Confucian culture on the strategic decisions of Chinese leaders. The narrative of a benign Chinese hegemony might be more appropriately viewed as an ancient myth" (290).

Two chapters focus particularly on China's future role in the global economy, especially how far China is likely to seek to alter existing institutions and operating principles as opposed to strengthening them. Cameron G. Thies of Arizona State University argues that overall, "China is still primarily acting as a responsible great power attempting to manage both global and regional problems in the economic arena" (225). During the Global Financial Crisis, China responded with efforts to shore up the existing system, in recompense obtaining enhancements in its own status in the International Monetary Fund.

21 Yuan-kang Wang, "International Order and Change in East Asian History," in China's Challenges and International Order Transition, eds. Feng and He, 141-160.

22 Jisheng Sun, "Chinese Culture, Ideas, and Approaches to Influence the International Order," in China's Challenges and International Order Transition, eds. Feng and He, 202-222.


In 2015 China also established the New Development Bank, to lend to its BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) partners, and a Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. What most concerned Thies is the fact that Donald Trump’s insistence on launching a trade war with China was “a troubling attack on the norm-based level of international order” as “the two largest economies in the world are sparring at the power-based level of order using a mechanism [tariffs] that the global trade regime has successfully sought to reduce and eliminate since the formation of the GATT in 1947.” (237). China, ironically, was proving more supportive than the United States of the Global International Economic Order.25 Prof. Xiao Ren of Fudan University in Shanghai likewise takes a fundamentally favorable view of China’s role in Global Economic Governance, arguing that it has moved from being a “participant to promoter, and more recently to builder of new institutions in GEG.” Ren believes that, “over the past forty years of reform and opening up to the outside world, China has undergone a process of both being shaped by the existing international order in terms of institutions and rules, and now shaping a new GEG structure” (240).26

Two American scholars, John M. Friend and Bradley A. Thayer, take a far less relaxed view of China’s activities and ambitions. The two are co-authors of a recent book on Han-centric Chinese nationalism and its impact on Chinese foreign policy.27 They view China as challenging the U.S.-led world order and embarked on an effort to “shape the rules and norms of global politics away from those anchored in liberalism and free trade toward those in accord with its political and cultural traditions.” They believe that, over the long term, China seeks to “not only supplant the United States as the leading voice in international institutions and the dominant force behind them, but will also labor to recast the international order to reflect its illiberal principles and values” (260). Characterizing China as “not a status quo power, but rather a revisionist state that seeks to transform the current order,” they urge the United States to take the offensive and do battle with China for “primacy” (261). The authors believe that in Africa and elsewhere, China is using “economic statecraft” to enhance its power and influence, following neo-mercantilist policies while looting recipient countries’ natural resources. By 2050, they predict, Beijing will be using its leverage “to pressure countries to abandon their democratic values and liberal policies” (273). Friend and Thayer advocate that the United States must launch a renewed battle for primacy with China, reinvesting in international institutions, reinforcing its existing alliances, and forging new bonds—“more pragmatic, value-free relationships”—with developing countries, regardless of whether or not these are non-democratic and authoritarian. A massive campaign to strengthen the United States in these respects is essential if it is to withstand China’s economic and strategic challenge to its predominant global position, stake in international institutions, and liberal-capitalist values and norms.28

The volume’s final chapter, by Xiaoyu Pu of the University of Nevada, offers a more measured evaluation of China’s ambitions and capabilities, including factors that might well undercut and compromise what some present as its near-inevitable trajectory toward international dominance. Building on the findings of other contributors, he argues: “China does not always challenge the existing order, nor is it eager to integrate into the existing order. China may seek to change rules in some domains while defending existing rules in other domains” (282). He points out that, just as a substantial section of the U.S. public would apparently be willing to jettison their country’s primacy in the world, considering this too expensive and poor value for money, so too: “While China might enjoy high status in international affairs, most Chinese might not be ready to take the responsibilities and costs as citizens of a global power. After all, global leadership is extremely


26 Xiao Ren, “China and Global Economic Governance: Shaped and/or Shaping?” in China’s Challenges and International Order Transition, eds. Feng and He, 240-258.


costly.” (288) Among the limitations that Pu perceives on China’s capabilities are the fact that it is not “a peer competitor” with the United States, which remains both economically and militarily stronger, and is moreover in the process of strengthening its Asian alliances. Other difficulties facing China include an ageing population, slowing economic growth, and widespread pollution and environmental degradation, as well as a shortfall in soft power. Even regional predominance might prove problematic. China is surrounded by major powers and solid middle powers, none of whom welcome the prospect of Chinese hegemony. Indeed, “[t]he more China pursues a hegemonic agenda in Asia, the more likely it will face backlash” (290). Despite the bellicose rhetoric of Xi Jinping and some of his supporters, other Chinese intellectuals express concern that China is already in a position of strategic overstretch and lacks the economic resources to support its grandiose ambitions. Pu suggests that China should seek to become one of several great powers, and should focus on cultivating its position in the developing world. Ultimately, given significant reservations among substantial segments of the American population over the economic costs of world predominance: “The reality might be that neither the United States nor China is willing to take a global leadership role in the new era” (294).

One interesting feature of the 14 chapters selected for this volume is what is not there. The majority of contributors highlight the constraints upon any potential move by China to attain global predominance, suggesting or at least implying that such policies would prove self-defeating. Three chapters by scholars from leading mainland universities present what might be termed the country’s current orthodoxy, that any Chinese rise will be peaceable, benign, and beneficial to the world, and that China aspires only to be a regional power. The implication is that fears that China seeks to replace U.S. global hegemony with its own are exaggerated and alarmist. The essay by Friend and Thayer is the only one to offer a dissenting perspective, arguing that the United States and even the world face an existential threat from Chinese ambitions, which must at all costs be countered. Nowhere in the book can one find the views of what might be termed hard-line Chinese expansionists on a dedicated quest to regain regional and ultimately world supremacy, a perspective espoused by the so-called “wolf warriors,” aggressive Chinese diplomats such as Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons Zhao Lijian and Hua Chunying, and popularized in the pages of the official Global Times newspaper. The presence of at least one chapter encapsulating this viewpoint would have been useful.

The belief that China is indeed already set on such a course, which is likely to provoke military conflict with the United States, is indeed one basic premise underlying Allison’s book. A major shortcoming in Allison’s analysis is, as Kirshner points out, his tendency to romanticize and exaggerate Chinese abilities. We are told that the Chinese state and its leaders possess an almost unique capacity for systematic long-term planning, all deployed to serve the objective of making China the world’s dominant power for the next century and beyond. Henry Kissinger, who considers himself the West’s most knowledgeable expert on China, and the late Singaporean senior minister Lee Kuan Yew, both counselled Allison that China’s rise is ineluctable, and that President Xi Jinping possesses the relentless determination to implement his vision of Chinese global leadership and international supremacy. In Kirshner’s pithy summary, Allison’s views on China “boil down to two conclusions: Chinese elites are really smart, and authoritarianism really works” (21).

China’s political system, with its emphasis upon the setting and attainment of ambitious national objectives, has indeed proved capable of implementing rapid technological change and delivering impressive results in terms of producing world-class modern infrastructure. The Belt and Road Initiative, launched by Xi Jinping in 2013, is a trillion-dollar overseas investment and aid programme intended to build infrastructure and promote Chinese investment and economic leadership around the world. The recent seventieth anniversary parade on 1 October 2019, highlighted a formidable range of advanced weaponry, proclaiming that China’s military is now a force for other powers to reckon with and respect. Even so, remarkable though much of this progress may be, the argument that either the Chinese mindset or the country’s political system is uniquely well suited to facilitate a long-term drive to “rule the world,” as one author has described it, seems both

ahistorical and culturally insensitive.\textsuperscript{30} The turbulent history of China since the 1911 revolution, or indeed during the past seven decades, scarcely suggests that China is immune from the problems and difficulties that afflict other states, large or small. There may be some substance to the view that Chinese leaders are disposed to take the long view and try to look several decades ahead. For over a century, one major goal of China—and many other developing nations—has been modernization, an objective that promotes thinking about the future in an extended timeframe.

Yet the idea that Chinese are inherently better equipped, whether genetically or culturally, to envisage and implement a decades-long campaign to take over and run the world is on a par with past popular depictions of Chinese as uniquely villainous, sinister criminal masterminds, with a penchant for drug dens and the white slave trade. Allison implies that the mindset of Chinese leaders is deeply influenced by their familiarity with the complicated rules of the board game Go and the famous treatise *The Art of War*, written by the ancient military strategist Sun Zhe (Sunzi) in the fifth century BCE, around the time that Thucydides penned his own manuscript. This arcane knowledge is, in turn, the secret ingredient that endows the Chinese with exceptional advantages in their quest for international dominance. One obvious retort to such determinist thinking is simply to ask why, in that case, China was not already supreme long ago. The irreverent might be tempted to inquire whether the unsurpassed excellence of China’s acrobats and ping-pong players—the latter have indeed sometimes featured prominently on the diplomatic stage—likewise permeates and influences the outlook of Chinese elites plotting the inexorable course of their country’s rise.

*The Real Lessons of Thucydides*

Allison’s deployment of Thucydides may leave much to be desired. But the subtle and nuanced approaches of Kirshner himself and of the two other works he reviews make it clear that the Greek historian offers cautionary and perhaps ominous lessons that are highly relevant to the current state of Sino-U.S. relations—not to mention other aspects of international affairs today. For Thucydides, little was foreordained. His history places much “emphasis on the central role of uncertainty and contingency in explaining outcomes.” Kirshner notes how Thucydides, himself a general in the war, where unexpected twists and turns were par for the course, “goes to great lengths to show that things need not have occurred as they did” (6-7). In this respect, Thucydides foreshadows the famous 1831 comment of the renowned German strategist Carl von Clausewitz: “War is the realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty. A sensitive and discriminating judgment is called for; a skilled intelligence to scent out the truth.”\textsuperscript{31}

Kirshner highlights the importance Thucydides ascribes to the balance of power among states and the way that shifting dynamics within complicated alliance arrangements can affect the entire system, often for the worse. He “illustrates the open-ended nature of international politics. Conflicts are not misunderstandings to be resolved but the result of inevitable conflicts of interest—and the resolution of one contest simply reveals the next waiting in the wings” (5). The result is that international relations are permanently in flux. Another important insight is that he “repeatedly roots actions taken in world politics in three principal motivations: fear, honor, and interest” (5). Regime type and domestic politics are crucial variables in explaining the courses of action that individual states and leaders choose. Thucydides “expected democracies to behave differently than nondemocracies and not necessarily in a good way” (6). Prudent and sensible leadership was also important. Thucydides feared that “democracies will be carried away by the malevolent schemes of charismatic demagogues” (6).


Kirshner argues forcefully that “two profound lessons” Thucydides seeks to impart represent the “most important” “takeaways” from his history. These are “warnings . . . about the fragility of civilization and danger of hubris” (7). He displayed perennial concern over “the stark consequences of anarchy” and the danger that the “wanton exercise of gratuitous violence” will become the norm as accepted standards of behavior break down (4). Even more salient, however, in his thinking was the potential for every side in a conflict to fall victim to overconfidence, leading to disastrous and rash decisions that rebounded on their originators. In his account, “it was not the power and designs of adversaries that led to Athenian defeat and ruin but rather hubris in the form of reckless overambition. Athens fell not because it was overtaken by rivals but because it became intoxicated with the idea of its own greatness and could not recognize the limits of its own power” (7-8). At least twice, the Athenians made imprudent decisions, first when, after seven years of war, they defeated the Spartans but then rejected a Spartan peace offer; and again when, rather than consolidating the gains they had made, they decided to try to conquer the island of Sicily, an adventure that ended in conclusive and humiliating defeat.

As one surveys the prevailing confused and unpredictable situation characterizing not just the relationship between the United States and China, but much of the world today, all these insights have just as much resonance for current international affairs as they did for the complicated origins and ever shifting course of the Peloponnesian War. The end of the Cold War, once hailed by the American policy intellectual Francis Fukuyama as ushering in “the end of history,” with liberal democracy and capitalism expected steadily to extend their benign benefits across a global system that recognized their efficacious superiority, proved the harbinger of no such new order. Such anticipations undoubtedly proved ironically hubristic, as unexpected events derailed the supposedly unstoppable advent of a liberal capitalist world order.

Instead, on 11 September 2001, the twenty-first century brought an unanticipated attack by radical Muslim activists from the al-Qaeda organization, most of them originally nationals of Saudi Arabia, in which two hijacked airliners destroyed the two towers of the iconic World Trade Center buildings in New York, and a third airplane crashed into the U.S. Defense Department’s Pentagon headquarters in Washington, DC. The United States and its Western allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) responded by invading Afghanistan, where al-Qaeda enjoyed the hospitality of the sympathetic Taliban government. In March 2003, the United States and Great Britain broke with much of the international community and launched a second war against Iraq, intended to overthrow the government of Saddam Hussein, the authoritarian president, and quickly replace his rule with a democratic government friendly to Western interests. By late 2019, both Afghanistan and Iraq had endured lengthy civil wars, in which Western occupying forces inevitably played a part, and neither country was as yet a model of stability. Hubris certainly played its part in compelling the U.S. and British governments to embark on a second war that did much to destabilize the entire Middle East, enhancing the power of Iran, a long-time U.S. opponent, and drawing in Russia as an ally of Syria, where President Bashir al-Assad survived a brutal and protracted civil war that brought further disruption to the entire region.

The overriding preoccupation and eventual embroilment of the United States with Middle Eastern affairs from late 2001 onward proved a bonus for China. Throughout the 1990s, relations between China and the United States were persistently rocky, enduring recurrent crises. The repression of protesters in Beijing and elsewhere in China on 4 June 1989 prompted many nations to impose extensive economic sanctions upon China, and produced bills in the United States Congress intended to deny China Most-Favored-Nation tariff status, measures that successive presidents vetoed. In spring 1996, heavy-handed Chinese efforts to prevent the re-election of Taiwan’s President Lee Teng-hui by conducting missile exercises near the island brought another major downturn in relations. In May 1999, the accidental U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, Serbia, an operation in which three Chinese journalists died and 27 people were injured, sparked major public demonstrations outside the U.S. embassy in Beijing and a diplomatic crisis. Two years later, in spring 2001, yet another stand-off occurred when a Chinese fighter jet collided with a U.S. surveillance plane gathering data off the Chinese coast, an episode in which the Chinese pilot died while the crippled American aircraft made a forced landing on Hainan Island, where the crew were held in Chinese custody for several days. Occurring in the first weeks of the administration of

Republican President George W. Bush, the incident seemed to presage the development of a new cold war between the United States and China, a country a significant number of Bush administration officials viewed with some hostility.

The new “War on Terror” proclaimed by President George W. Bush deflected his administration’s attention from China, impelling the United States to concentrate instead upon the Middle East and the protracted consequences of military engagements in the region. Chinese General Secretary Hu Jintao and Premier Wei Jiabao, selected for those positions in 2002 and 2003 respectively, focused single-mindedly upon economic growth and development, continuing the market policies introduced by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s and carried forward by President Jiang Zemin and Premier Zhu Rongji throughout the 1990s. From 1979 to 2018, Chinese annual GDP real growth averaged 9.7 percent, though in the past five years it has slowed. The country’s exports and its trade surpluses with many western countries, notably the United States, both soared. Many of China’s profits and surplus currency were invested in US treasury bonds, while Chinese purchases of food and raw materials from Latin America, Africa, and Australia rose dramatically, as did Chinese investment in the developing world. By 2010, China had overtaken Japan to become the world’s second largest economy, and it was expected to surpass the United States around 2030. On a purchasing power parity basis, China is believed to have become the world’s largest economy in 2014, though per capita output and living standards are still far below those in the United States.33

In 2008 most of the world suffered a major economic downturn, following a financial crash due to imprudent banking decisions in the United States. In a startling role reversal, Chinese officials lectured their Western counterparts on the need for responsible economic policies, and Chinese growth—in part the product of a Chinese domestic stimulus package—played a major part in keeping the world economy afloat. The travails of the advanced economies that had once served as models for China also emboldened its leaders to be more assertive, in terms of stepping forward on the international stage. President Xi Jinping, who succeeded Hu Jintao in 2012, embarked on an aggressive program of fortifying and extending islands in the South China Sea to which China laid claim, in defiance of counterclaims from the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Brunei. Xi announced the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, whereby China would provide capital funding for the development of land-based and maritime infrastructure intended to facilitate economic development across Eurasia and beyond, in Latin America, Africa, and possibly even North America. To finance this initiative, in 2014 he founded a Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), a rival to the existing western-dominated International Monetary Fund and World Bank and the heavily Japanese-influenced Asian Development Bank, as well as the new Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) that was initially backed by the United States, before President Donald Trump decided to abandon it. All were part of what Xi Jinping described as the “China Dream,” an ambitious bid to remake China, internally and externally, as a successful state that was a model and inspiration to powers nearby and further away, who would inevitably succumb to the lure of China’s example and be drawn into its orbit.34

Xi’s initiatives were accompanied by a sweeping modernization of the Chinese military, especially at the technological level, as China poured resources into developing hardware of every kind, tanks, missiles, submarines, aircraft, and delivery vehicles, while cutting troop numbers but improving their training. They also went hand-in-hand with the insistent promulgation of a national narrative emphasizing the rigours and injustices of China’s ‘century of humiliation’ at the hands of Western states and Japan, and praising the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the People’s Republic of China for reversing this ignominious abasement and regaining for China the status and respect it deserved. Determined to suppress any internal opposition to his vision of China’s greatness, Xi cracked down harshly on both Tibet and Xinjiang, where over a million ethnic Tibetans and Uighurs were consigned to re-education camps intended to change their existing cultural and religious values and make them over into good Han Chinese. Internal dissent by Han Chinese was likewise severely controlled through heavy censorship of print and electronic media, with access to many politically suspect foreign websites blocked, and

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anything considered undesirable, including pornography and cartoons as well as unacceptable political or religious materials, taken down. Protest movements of every kind, including feminist efforts to force China to fulfill the promises of its own constitution, labor or environmental activism, and political dissent, were all subject to harsh repression. For such unfortunates, the China dream seemed to resemble nothing more than a China nightmare.

In October 2017, the Chinese constitution was changed to allow Xi Jinping to serve more than two terms as president. His collected writings and speeches, packaged as “Xi Jinping Thought,” became compulsory reading in schools, universities, and elsewhere, with expertise in his thinking required, for example, to win promotion as a journalist in the official media. He toured the world incessantly, seeking opportunities and influence on every continent and finding many governments and businesses around the globe that were happy to accept Chinese funding and investment, or seeking access to the China market. At home, his government introduced an intrusive “social credit” system, intended to compile electronic data from all available sources to monitor and evaluate the political and financial reliability of all citizens and businesses, information that could then be used to control their access to such resources as loans, education, jobs, housing, and domestic and foreign travel. By 2018, China was home to almost half the world’s surveillance cameras, some of which could reportedly identify individuals up to 9 miles away. At all levels, the Chinese state poured money into developing, installing, and utilizing surveillance technology, its budget for which surpassed that for national defense from 2010 onwards.

Initially, the January 2017 accession of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States seemed likely to smooth China’s path to global ascendancy. Trump vocally proclaimed his belief that the United States should reduce its international commitments, calling upon his country’s allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Japan, and South Korea to shoulder more of the burden of their own defense. Lacking any interest in human rights and demonstrating a pronounced affinity for authoritarian rulers, not just in China but in Russia, Turkey, Brazil, and the Middle East, the president seemed likely to acquiesce in the expansion of Chinese international influence. His foremost preoccupation, overriding almost all others, was to reduce U.S. trade imbalances with other nations, if necessary, by imposing heavy tariffs on imports into the United States, a strategy Trump employed with China incrementally from January 2018 onward, bringing Chinese retaliation and then negotiations that arrived at a Phase One deal in late 2019, which was nicely timed to boost Trump’s 2020 re-election campaign.

By this time, Chinese officials rather complacently believed that they had taken Trump’s measure: so long as they handed him trade concessions and economic sweeteners that he could present as victories to his devoted followers, Trump would give China a free pass in terms of repression, whether in Xinjiang, Tibet, or Hong Kong, and stand back as China extended its military and strategic footprint in the South China Sea and eroded American influence in Asia and elsewhere. Revelations by John Bolton, a former national security adviser, that Trump had sought Xi Jinping’s assistance in winning re-election suggested that Trump had given Chinese leaders ample reason to believe that, given enough favors, he could easily be manipulated. As 2020 began, Chinese officials were rather comfortably looking forward to a second Trump

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administration. However erratic and unpredictable the president might be, they believed they could manage him to their own advantage, while trusting him to wreak havoc on American alliances.

Yet, as Kirshner points out, one of the major insights that Thucydides offers is that great divergences in national values and characters are liable to stymie efforts by states to understand and compromise with each other. For several years, the Trump administration’s China policy had possessed a certain schizophrenic element. Arguably, within its ranks the president was China’s best and perhaps only friend, something that was also true of the administration’s position toward Russia. Leading figures today in Trump’s often-shifting national security apparatus, including Vice President Mike Pence (Trump’s designated successor should he die in office), Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, and National Security Adviser Robert O’Brien all regard China as the leading global threat to U.S. dominance, one that they are determined to counter. In pursuit of this goal, O’Brien, for example, committed himself to expanding the United States Navy, an objective enshrined in the Pentagon’s National Defense Strategy, published by then Defense Secretary James Mattis in January 2018. This document highlighted both China and Russia as major adversaries and competitors of the United States, posing threats that demanded a massive defense build-up.39

This outlook was likewise enshrined in the U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS-2017) published in December 2017. This document bluntly stated: “China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. They are determined to make economies less free and less fair, to grow their militaries, and to control information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence.” Characterizing China and Russia as “revisionist powers,” it warned that “China and Russia want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests. China seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, expand the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor.” According to the authors:

For decades, U.S. policy was rooted in the belief that support for China’s rise and for its integration into the post-war international order would liberalize China. Contrary to our hopes, China expanded its power at the expense of the sovereignty of others. China gathers and exploits data on an unrivaled scale and spreads features of its authoritarian system, including corruption and the use of surveillance. It is building the most capable and well-funded military in the world, after our own. Its nuclear arsenal is growing and diversifying. Part of China’s military modernization and economic expansion is due to its access to the U.S. innovation economy, including America’s world-class universities.40

Visiting the Balkan states in October 2019, Pompeo warned North Macedonia against “the risks of Chinese investment and sensitive technologies” under the Belt and Road Initiative, highlighting and condemning “China’s bribe-heavy strategy for infrastructure deals.”41 Another related fear was that Chinese external investment by state-owned enterprises not only risked making those nations economically dependent upon China and therefore politically subservient to their patron, but was in many cases so extensive that the borrowers would be caught in a “debt trap” in which they were unable to pay back their

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loans. The Maldive islands, where a new government came to power in September 2019 expressing fears that the country’s debts to China might run as high as US$3 billion, was just one example.\(^42\)

In Washington, DC, in March 2019 high-profile national security intellectuals, defense hawks, and Chinese activists also launched the Committee on the Present Danger: China. Its stated mission was “to help defend America through public education and advocacy against the full array of conventional and non-conventional dangers posed by the People’s Republic of China. As with the Soviet Union in the past, Communist China represents an existential and ideological threat to the United States and to the idea of freedom—one that requires a new American consensus regarding the policies and priorities required to defeat this threat.” Numerous articles and press releases posted on the Committee’s website offer a highly alarmist view of China’s policies and ambitions, while praising efforts by administration officials and others to boost American defenses.\(^43\) While Trump’s national security personnel were until recently usually somewhat more restrained in their warnings, links existed between the two camps: Steve Bannon, for example, a close adviser and strategist for Trump during his 2016 presidential campaign, is a member. The Committee’s roster also includes quite a number of retired military officers and intelligence operatives, including James Woolsey, a former director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

China has in the past sought to enhance its soft power as a cheap means of boosting its international influence. But its harsh internal repression and meddling in the affairs of other nations, including heavy-handed efforts to censor what foreign academics and journalists publish and what is taught in overseas classrooms, as well as moves to pressure foreign companies and organizations doing business in China to toe the party line on political issues, began backfiring dramatically. Delivering the keynote address at a round table conference of 200 business leaders in Singapore, organized by the Chinese firm Caixin, the former U.S. trade representative and World Bank head Robert Zoellick bluntly stated of China’s surveillance policies: “I have to be open with you: when the Chinese political system uses technology to watch the public … the best term I can use is – many people in the U.S. find it creepy.”\(^44\) Even so, Zoellick, who in 2005 as deputy Secretary of State urged China to become a “responsible stakeholder” in the world system, declared in 2019: “There is a new conventional wisdom [in the US] that American and Western cooperation with China has failed. I think this is flat wrong,” he editorialized, urging wide-ranging talks between China and the United States on all the issues dividing them.\(^45\)

The prospects for such exchanges were dwindling. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, extensive networks of overlapping and intertwined bilateral dialogues linked the United States and China, as did a wide array of multilateral exchanges. Yet whether even this greatly reinforced fabric of institutional and personal connections possessed the strength and resilience to address successfully the new challenges and uncertainties Sino-American relations encountered following Trump’s surprise 2016 election victory seemed increasingly problematic. After more than forty years, the relationship between the United States and China remained heavily dependent upon a surprisingly small community of knowledgeable experts, many of whom on the American side circulated through the interlocking think tank, academic, and policymaking worlds.

Over the past ten to fifteen years, a major paradigm shift has occurred among influential American elites with any interest in or input into the conduct of Sino-U.S. relations. From the 1970s until the early 2000s, they could be roughly divided into


\(^43\) See the website of the Committee on the Present Danger: China, [https://presentdangerchina.org/about-us/](https://presentdangerchina.org/about-us/).


two broad camps. The first and—in terms of policymaking—largely dominant outlook comprised those who were relatively friendly to China, supported its integration into the existing international system, saw it as a potential partner, supported ‘constructive engagement’ with China, and believed that within China itself economic progress and growth would ultimately translate into peaceful evolution towards more liberal political institutions and practices. A second and more antagonistic but overall less influential grouping consisted of individuals who regarded China with hostility, either due to a perception of China as a potential strategic rival and economic competitor to the United States and a threat to Taiwan, issues Republicans tended to find particularly disturbing, or because of their distaste for China’s authoritarian political system and policies, especially in such areas as human rights, legal practices, governance, and its policies toward Tibet, subjects on which Democrats often felt especially strongly.

The past decade has seen a marked shift within the U.S. elite foreign policy community toward a far less benign view of China and its policies on a wide range of international and domestic issues. For whatever reason, following the global financial crisis of 2008-2010 and its aftermath, relations between the United States and China became steadily more strained. Hillary Clinton, who was Secretary of State during Barack Obama’s first administration, sought to persuade U.S. allies in Asia to work together to restrain Chinese military ambitions and assertiveness in the Western Pacific, especially the PRC’s claims that most of the South China Sea should be considered Chinese territorial waters. By the time that Donald Trump became president in January 2017, within the United States, the goodwill towards China that characterized the later twentieth century had steadily dissipated. Within the United States, politicians, officials, and the intellectual community dealing with China were increasingly divided between relative moderates who, despite harboring strong reservations over many of the PRC’s actions, still believed that some degree of constructive cooperation between the two countries was attainable, and uncompromising hard-liners—the new Committee on the Present Danger: China, for example—who anticipated a future characterized by ever-intensifying Sino-American strategic, economic, and ideological antagonism.

Overall, elite views of China have become far less tolerant and sympathetic. With the exception of a few prominent but by now aged senior figures such as Henry Kissinger and former U.S. ambassador to China J. Stapleton Roy, the majority even of China’s defenders found much to deplor in that country’s behavior, including its economic and trade practices; its human rights record, especially the treatment of dissidents, Tibetans, and Uighurs; its policies toward Hong Kong and Taiwan; China’s increasingly assertive behavior in the South China Sea and elsewhere in the world; aspects of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, especially its use of ‘debt diplomacy’ to win control of valuable resources and strategic strongpoints in developing countries; and Chinese efforts to pressure foreign universities, the media, and publishers to suppress and censor all criticism and sometimes even reporting of PRC policies, especially with regard to Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, Xinjiang, and internal dissent. Between 2017 and 2019, reports published by prominent U.S. think tanks, notably the Asia Society and the Hoover Institution, and signed by some of the most prominent U.S. China specialists, some of whom had previously been far less critical of China, recommended that the United States implement a much tougher line toward China than it had in the past.46 It was clear that even American moderates were now far more suspicious of Chinese policies and less willing to compromise on or ignore contentious issues.

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By 2018, similar divisions had emerged among Australian China specialists. In an open letter to the Australian Parliament, some warned against “alarmist” discourse that they feared was causing “the creation of a racialised narrative of a vast official Chinese conspiracy.”47 In response, a second group of scholars submitted an open letter highlighting the “need to encourage careful research into the CCP’s covert and sometimes coercive activities here in Australia and in other countries, where we note that concern is also rising. Identifying, recognising and winding back CCP interference as an unacceptable and counterproductive part of bilateral engagement is a step towards developing a healthy China-Australia relationship over the long term.” In their view, “some of the CCP’s activities constitute unacceptable interference in Australian society and politics.”48 Others focused upon strategic issues. A report published in August 2019 by the Centre for US Studies of Australia’s University of Sydney, for example, highlighted the growing military strength of China in the Asia-Pacific region, even as US spending there fell by 21 percent between 2011 and 2018. The authors urged both Australia and its allies, including the United States and Japan, to boost their military capabilities and presence in the region, while suggesting that Australia redeploy forces in the Middle East and move them closer to home.49

Distrust of China was not limited to Australia and the United States. By 2019, the liberal Hungarian-born billionaire George Soros had lost faith in the PRC, or more specifically, in the rule of Xi Jinping. Speaking at the annual World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland, in January 2019, Soros charged that China’s social credit system and its use of artificial intelligence to impose “totalitarian control” on the country’s people represented “an unprecedented danger that’s threatening the very survival of open societies.” Soros characterized the Belt and Road Initiative as “designed to promote the interests of China, not the interests of the recipient countries.” He also welcomed the decision of the U.S. government to identify China as a “strategic rival.” Soros was alarmed that China wished “to dictate rules and procedures that govern the digital economy by dominating the developing world with its new platforms and technologies,” which he considered “a threat to the freedom of the Internet and indirectly open society itself.” He suggested that “instead of waging a trade war with practically the whole world, the US should focus on China.”50 Speaking again at Davos the following year, Soros assailed Trump’s “phase one” trade deal with China.51

Soros was not alone. A Pew Research Centre poll, conducted across 32 countries between May and August 2019 and published by the Washington, DC think tank on the PRC’s seventieth anniversary, revealed that internationally, negative views of China were overall increasing. This tendency was particularly marked across Western Europe, Canada, and the United States, with respondents in several East European and Baltic countries, where China has invested heavily, more ambivalent. Over 60 percent of Americans and 67 percent of Canadians had a negative impression of China. In Russia,


Ukraine, much of the Middle East, Latin America, and sub-Saharan Africa, favorable opinions of China were more common. Perhaps most ominously, however, in its own Asia-Pacific neighborhood, negative views of China had reached all-time record highs: 85 percent in Japan, 63 percent in South Korea, 57 percent in Australia, and 54 percent in the Philippines thought badly of China. Moreover, according to the study’s authors: “Opinion of China has also fallen across the region over the course of Pew Research Centre’s polling and is now hovering at or near historic lows in each of the countries surveyed.”

In late 2019, Foreign Affairs, the influential journal of the Council on Foreign Relations, a think tank whose efforts during the 1950s and 1960s had quietly helped to promote support for the reopening of U.S. relations, took the symbolic step of publishing an article with the title “The Sources of Chinese Conduct.” Written by the Yale academic Odd Arne Westad, one of the most prominent scholars of Chinese engagement with the world and of the Cold War, it was a deliberate reprise of George F. Kennan’s famous 1947 essay “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” a seminal text that laid out the doctrine of “containment” that became the fundamental strategy underpinning Western Cold War policies. Westad, whom some critics had in the past occasionally considered too sympathetic to China, depicted a regime that had enjoyed a period of “spectacular economic growth,” but that was “ruled, increasingly dictatorially, by an unelected communist party that puts people in prison for their convictions and limits all forms of free expression and association.” The party offered “relentless propaganda about the greatness and righteousness of China,” while “claim[ing] that the outside world, especially the United States, is out to undo China’s progress, or at least prevent its further rise.” Characterizing Chinese nationalism as “sinister,” Westad highlighted the fact that China effectively constituted an empire, engaged in repression of the indigenous populations of Inner Mongolia, Tibet, and Xinjiang, annexed regions that had not been originally Chinese. Both economically and militarily, Chinese power was growing.

Westad argued that earlier Western expectations that with prosperity China would gradually liberalize had been proven “foolish: the CCP is strengthening its rule and intends to remain in power forever.” Using tactics similar to those the Soviet Union had employed in Europe in the 1940s, China was seeking “predominance” in “East Asia, a region that is as important to the United States today as Europe was at the beginning of the Cold War.” Bluntly, he warned: “Unless the United States acts to counteract it, China is likely to become the undisputed master of East Asia, from Japan to Indonesia, by the late 2020s.” He recommended that, if the United States wished to compete, it must strengthen its alliances in Asia, address domestic polarization, and “prepare for a long campaign for influence that will test its own ability for strategic prioritizing and long-term planning.”

By this juncture, China’s international standing, authority, and relationships with other states were already facing additional new challenges. Yet more complications arose in Hong Kong in June 2019, when a lengthy crisis, sparked initially by a poorly drafted and ill-considered bill that would have permitted a variety of extraditions to China, prompted massive citywide protests, as well as an international backlash against China. Underlying these demonstrations was deep resentment of the manner in which Chinese power over Hong Kong was exercised, grievances which were exacerbated by economic polarization, high housing prices, and falling living standards and career prospects for the majority of the population, especially the young. Reluctance to endure the international consequences of a Tiananmen-style military crackdown on Hong Kong protesters apparently inhibited Beijing from outright intervention, and instead the local government adopted a strategy of attrition, relying heavily on repressive police tactics, including massive use of tear gas and rubber bullets against protesters. From early July until January 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic brought temporary lockdown to Hong Kong, increasing levels of violence and vandalism were employed by at least a minority of protesters, provoking an increasingly


harsh police response, but unrest persisted. The protesters proved infinitely more media-savvy and sophisticated in getting their message across to a global audience than wooden and robotic Hong Kong and Chinese officials could manage to be.

By summer 2019, leading Hong Kong protesters were so disillusioned with their city’s situation under Chinese control that they were prepared to sacrifice the special advantages and privileges the city enjoyed if China continued to refuse to relax its grip and make concessions. The prominent young activist Joshua Wong and other democracy advocates testified before the U.S. Congress, supporting the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, legislation that would impose damaging sanctions on both China and Hong Kong in the event of a PRC crackdown in the city, and that would also target with travel bans and asset forfeitures individuals who had suppressed democracy in Hong Kong. The implicit message to China was that, should the PRC destroy Hong Kong, this might also bring down China itself. Or, as the protesters put it to the Hong Kong government and its pro-establishment supporters, “if we burn, you burn with us.”

In the mid-1990s, even as bitter disputes raged between Great Britain and China over just how Hong Kong should be governed after 1997, all parties in Hong Kong, including British, American, local, and Chinese businesses and the British-run government, had worked together with Chinese officials to oppose efforts by the U.S. Congress to withdraw Most Favored Nation trade status from China. Now, for at least large portions of the Hong Kong community, the identity of economic interests that had once united Hong Kong and China was dissolved.

Opposition to and distrust of the People’s Republic of China and its policies had become one of the exceedingly few subjects on which a political consensus existed within the U.S. Congress. Since at least the 1990s, Republicans and Democrats had grown ever more polarized, finding it remarkably difficult to reach agreement on almost every issue. On China, however, politicians from across the spectrum were increasingly united. In the 1990s and the early twenty-first century, at least some senators and representatives were reasonably sympathetic toward China, while those who received financial backing from businesses that had invested heavily in China often tended to restrain their criticism. By 2020, however, China had rather few if any friends left in Congress. In autumn 2019, over fierce protests from Beijing and the Hong Kong government, both houses of Congress passed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act. Introduced with bipartisan sponsorship, it won unanimous consent from the Senate and was passed in the House by a 417-1 vote. Trump, never an enthusiast for human rights, had shown himself reluctant to comment on the Hong Kong situation, which he considered an internal Chinese issue, as he did the plight of the Uighurs. Eventually, though, he acceded to force majeure and on 27 November 2019 quietly signed the legislation. He probably felt that, should he veto it, a public brawl as Congress overrode his veto might derail ongoing trade negotiations with China. Many suspected that, even if attempts should be made to activate its provisions, Trump might well fail to implement these.

The Impact of Covid-19

In normal circumstances, the U.S. president might indeed have refrained from moving on the issue. Within weeks, however, a new, unexpected, and before long global crisis engulfed the world: the rapid spread from China to other countries of the virus that ultimately became known as the Covid-19 pandemic. To make the Thucydidean resonances yet more acute, this unforeseen contagion mirrored the outbreak of plague that afflicted Athens during the Peloponnesian War, killing Pericles, their most prudent leader, and thousands of others. In combination with the ongoing Hong Kong troubles, and the potent coincidence of both with a particularly brutal election year, it created the perfect storm situation for Sino-US relations.

From Donald Trump’s perspective, perhaps the most important consequence of the pandemic was that the country-wide lockdown he finally and rather reluctantly imposed in March 2020 appeared likely to derail what he had assumed would be a triumphal progress to re-election that November, fuelled by a booming U.S. economy. As ‘non-essential’ businesses of every kind shut down at least temporarily, travel became close to impossible, and tens of millions of Americans were forced to work from home, while infections and deaths soared, unemployment also rose dramatically. As the original source of Covid-19, China not only became the target of pervasive hostility in the United States, but also faced significant international
opprobrium. By early November 2020, the virus had infected more than 10 million Americans, over 240,000 of whom had
died, with the numbers of new cases reaching over 100,000 per day and still rising dramatically. Globally, the pandemic
spread rapidly, first across East Asia and Europe, before taking hold in Australia, Latin America, South and Central Asia, the
Middle East, and Africa. By the first week of November, over 50 million cases and 1.25 million deaths had been reported
worldwide, with an extra million cases identified approximately every two days, figures that were undoubtedly
underestimates. In many countries, in autumn 2020 the spread of the virus showed no sign of slowing, with health systems
overwhelmed and a second and accelerating wave afflicting much of Europe and the United States, even as economic activity
fell dramatically. China’s early draconian lockdown policies had proved remarkably effective in checking the spread of the
virus in China itself, but had done little or nothing to prevent its transmission to other nations. In the circumstances, self-
congratulatory statements by Chinese leaders as to how successfully their own country had addressed an illness apparently
hatched within their borders and exported globally only rubbed salt in the wounds of states afflicted by this modern-day
plague.

For a few months, China’s diplomats and leaders seem to have recognized that tact and restraint might be in order. Once
President Xi Jinping took office in 2012, Chinese voices counselling moderation and continued rapprochement with the
United States were conspicuously excluded from Beijing political circles, while informal elite contacts among influential
Chinese and Americans languished and fell into abeyance.56 By fall 2019, forums for the exchange of views were less effective
than in the past, since “most of the nearly 100 official bilateral dialogue mechanisms with China from when Barack Obama
was US president have been stalled under the Trump administration.”57

There were some attempts to repair the damage and prevent further deterioration. As the relationship deteriorated on
multiple fronts in late 2019, some prominent Chinese policy intellectuals—many of whom had become somewhat
peripheral under Xi Jinping—and their Western counterparts repeatedly called for restraint, caution, and communication
between China and its critics. In November, the 96-year-old Henry Kissinger warned the New Economy Forum in Beijing
that China and United States were already “in the foothills of a Cold War” in which any “relatively minor crisis” involving
China and the United States had the potential to spiral into major military hostilities, just as occurred when World War I
began in 1914. He hoped that ongoing trade negotiations would not only succeed but would prove only the prelude to more
wide-ranging discussions.58 The following month, the well-connected Li Ruogu, formerly head of the Export and Import
Bank of China, consciously echoed Kissinger, telling a meeting on Hainan Island that “a hot war” involving “armed conflict
between China and the States is possible if a crisis is not contained.” Zhang Baijia, who had served as deputy director of the
Party History Research Centre, likewise feared that Chinese and American miscalculations of the other’s intentions could
lead to an unplanned armed confrontation.59

56 Orville Schell, "China Strikes Back!" New York Review of Books, 23 October 2014,
https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2014/10/23/china-strikes-back/; Edward Wong, "Xi Jinping’s Inner Circle Offers Cold Shoulders to
inner-circle-western-officials.html; and Keira Huang, Nectar Gan, and Kristine Kwok, “Now For the Hard Part: Following Up Xi
Jinping’s Trip with Action,” South China Morning Post, 30 September 2015, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-

57 Kinling Lo, “US Bill on Hong Kong Won’t Help City out of Political Crisis, Former Diplomat Says,” South China Morning
political-crisis-former.

58 Xinhua, “Kissinger Hopes U.S.-China Trade Negotiations Would Succeed,” 21 November 2019,

59 Jun Mai, "Former Chinese Officials Warn Tensions with US Raise Risk of ‘Accidental Conflict’, “South China Morning Post,
In the early months of 2020, fighting the pandemic became the overwhelming preoccupation for Chinese leaders. In May, however, as lockdowns eased, calls for moderation resumed. Professor Shi Yinhong of Renmin University, an adviser to China's State Council, publicly urged the “wolf warriors” to tone down their aggressive rhetoric on the United States, as did Zhu Feng, Dean of International Relations at Nanjing University, and Yan Xuetong, another prominent Chinese policy intellectual. All warned of the danger that such highly antagonistic language would prove counter-productive and prompt a backlash against China. Later that month, Prof. Jia Qingguo of Peking University, a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, repeated this advice, urging China to focus upon combating the pandemic, especially by boosting its ability to deal with a potential second wave of the virus, and “for its own sake to speed up resumption of economic activities” within China and beyond, ideally in cooperation with the World Health Organization, International Monetary Fund, and World Bank. He also suggested that China should “manage and control the disputes over the South China Sea” and “step up communications” with other countries in the area.

Yet less than a month later, one of China’s top scholars of international relations, Wang Jisi, dean of the school of international studies at Peking University, told the World Peace Forum in Beijing that “China policy” was “almost certain” to feature prominently in the coming U.S. presidential election, and feared that “the Trump camp may create a few incidents within this time frame to show its determination to contain China. That could be dangerous.” Suggesting that existing tensions between China and the United States might prove “sensationally more distressing” than those between Moscow and Washington during the Cold War, Wang thought it possible that “an unexpected event . . . will escalate into a deadly clash.” Warning that simple “signaling” of intentions would not suffice, he concluded: “We need to have clear communications about red lines.” Former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, a long-time supporter of good relations between the West and China, attending the same meeting, agreed wholeheartedly.

Both were particularly concerned by the possibility that a crisis might arise over the island of Taiwan, which China still considered a renegade province. Events in Hong Kong since the introduction of the now defunct Extradition Bill in spring 2019 had massive reverberations in Taiwan, giving a massive boost to the political standing of the government of President Tsai Ing-wen and her Democratic Progressive Party, which supported continued separation from mainland China. Tsai, who had previously appeared to be heading for defeat in the January 2020 Taiwan elections, won a record number of votes. Even her main opponent, Kuomintang Party candidate Han Kuo-yu, was forced to promise that only “over my dead body” would the One Country Two Systems framework governing Hong Kong’s relations with China be imposed upon Taiwan. Tsai treated her re-election as evidence that Taiwan possessed “a separate identity and we’re a country of our own,” urging the mainland to accept this reality. The U.S. Congress responded by introducing the Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative (TAIPEI) Act, passed unanimously by the US Senate in October 2019 and by the House the following March. It was intended to provide U.S. support for Taiwan in strengthening its international alliances and help the island and its people to resist Chinese “bullying.” Under its provisions, the United States would consider reducing its own economic, security, and diplomatic ties with nations that took significant action to undermine Taiwan. Conversely, it would consider “increasing its economic, security, and diplomatic engagement with nations that have demonstrably strengthened, enhanced, or upgraded relations with Taiwan.” The United States government was also instructed to advocate

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membership for Taiwan in all international organizations where statehood was not a requirement, and to request that Taiwan be granted observer status in other international organizations. Trump quietly signed the bill in late March 2020.63

In the first months of 2020, further congressional legislation likewise targeted China, allowing the imposition of sanctions on officials responsible for repression against the Uighurs in Xinjiang and efforts to suppress protests in Hong Kong. In addition, Congress introduced bills intended to restrain Chinese “debt-trap” diplomacy, the practice of providing loans to smaller nations that the borrowers could not repay, making them vulnerable to Chinese economic and strategic control.64 Once Covid-19 took hold in the United States, a number of prominent Republican senators and congressmen sponsored measures that would allow states and private groups and individuals to sue the Chinese government for compensation for the economic damage, deaths, and illness inflicted by Covid-19, with some—including Trump confidant Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina—suggesting that the United States and other sovereign lenders should simply confiscate the massive funds that China had invested in foreign government securities, including U.S. Treasury bonds.65 The American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank in Washington, DC, and the London-based Henry Jackson Society Foundation both published studies urging the establishment of an international coalition, in association with the International Monetary Fund and other major international economic institutions, to force China to pay reparations to all other countries adversely affected by the virus.66


As the Covid-19 pandemic intensified, various commentators expressed alarm that the financial difficulties China’s debtors in the developing world would face in meeting their obligations would make it even easier for emerging economies to fall completely under Chinese control, as the PRC would take over their national assets if they defaulted. Even forgiveness of these debts would, it was suggested, boost China’s soft power and influence. Others argued that the crisis was likely to have a major financial impact on China itself, jeopardizing the Belt and Road Initiative and China’s position in Africa and other nations as multiple debtors default simultaneously. Dispatching shipments of face-masks and medical supplies and delegations of Chinese health-care professionals to help other countries combat the Covid-19 crisis might be far too small a contribution to dispel elite and popular resentment of China’s role in spreading the virus in the first place. By the first weeks of April, demands for African debt relief had become particularly insistent. China initially tried to respond to these requests through discreet bilateral negotiations, but these patchwork arrangements did not satisfy the expectations of its African creditors.

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China and the other G-20 countries then agreed to a debt moratorium for the world’s poorest nations that would suspend all repayments of bilateral official credit from May to December 2020, with commercial creditors expected to follow suit.71 Almost immediately, African countries warned that this agreement would be inadequate to meet their needs, and sought the extension of the moratorium for a further year, plus the restructuring—a euphemism for at least partial cancellation—of their overall debt burden. France expressed sympathy, while an African Union special envoy expressed the belief that China was “coming along” with the idea of establishing a multilateral framework to restructure international debt.72

On 17 April, the Washington Post published an op-ed article by Obiageli “Oby” Ezekwesili, former vice-president for Africa at the World Bank and a former minister of education for Nigeria, that represented probably merely the opening salvo in an African campaign for compensation from China. Africa should not, she argued, simply rely on “voluntary international aid” to meet the ravages of Covid-19, which was expected to reduce African gross domestic product by up to 4.5 percent, causing 20 million to lose their jobs and “badly reduce[ing] the opportunity Africa would otherwise have had to lift hundreds of millions out of poverty.” In Ezekwesili’s view, “the best solution” was instead that “The continent must be accorded damages and liability compensation from China, the rich and powerful country that failed to transparently and effectively manage this global catastrophe.” As a first step, to provide “partial compensation to African countries for the impact” to date of Covid-19, “China should immediately announce a complete write-off of the more than $140 billion that its government, banks and contractors extended to countries in Africa between 2000 and 2017.” This would be followed by “discussions with the Africa Union and its member countries, alongside global and regional organizations including the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the African Development Bank, and the European Union,” to determine “the balance of compensation due to Africa.” Ezekwesili concluded by proclaiming:

China should demonstrate world leadership by acknowledging its failure to be transparent on covid-19. Beijing’s leadership should then commit to an independent expert panel evaluation of its pandemic response. China and the rest of the Group of 20 countries should engage with the Africa Union and countries to design a reparations mechanism.73

After weeks of negotiations, in late June 2020, Xi Jinping responded by cancelling all of China’s interest-free loans to African countries. Although these represented only 5 percent of the more than $150 billion African states owed China in total, it was an indication that China was beginning to make concessions to its debtors.74 With the thin end of the wedge now inserted, almost certainly, the pressures upon China in this area would continue.


China has in recent years acted as if its available resources for international investment were unlimited. It is now a major creditor of around 40 countries and an important creditor of many more. When creditor nations found themselves unable to repay, in the past Chinese diplomats negotiated separate deals with each nation or business, often on terms highly advantageous to itself. China is likely to come under immense pressure to abandon its preference for bilateral closed-door negotiations and instead join the Paris Club, which coordinates rescheduling of sovereign debts on a multilateral basis. It is clearly reluctant to do so, especially at a time when its own financial resources and economy are contracting rather than growing. But the Chinese government may find it has little alternative. Whatever happens, it will almost inevitably be forced to write off large portions of its international investments in Belt and Road ventures. And forceful measures to appropriate valuable assets in these nations might well provoke direct confrontations of a kind that China has not yet experienced in its quest for international economic power and leverage.75

In early April, A. Wess Mitchell, who was U.S. assistant secretary of state for Europe and Eurasian affairs from 2017 to 2019, suggested that Covid-19 offers a valuable and much-needed opportunity for the United States and European nations to “come together” in opposing the spread of Chinese influence.76 It is worth noting that the debt relief proposals now being vocally advocated by politicians in the United States and Britain and by think tanks in both countries envisage a coordinated coalition of debtor nations, one that would exert international pressure on China and in the last resort possibly simply seize Chinese assets as compensation for the ravages the virus has wreaked upon their people and livelihood. The potential for a great unravelling of Chinese economic diplomacy undoubtedly existed, though how far this would come to pass was still unclear.

Meanwhile, the pandemic itself, which brought major restrictions on travel, also reduced the possibility for informal back-channel meetings between influential Chinese and Americans. Even as relations deteriorated, personal encounters became far more physically difficult, possibly because the Chinese at least were nonplussed by the hostile international environment they were encountering. In May 2020, one former American diplomat who had migrated to a business consulting firm said of potential non-governmental contacts: “At this point the Chinese side doesn’t have a message other than we need to talk. That’s not a particularly compelling message.” Moreover, as Jude Blanchette of the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank in Washington, DC pointed out, although many such informal contacts focused upon business, the “strong Wall Street-to-Beijing channel” was not “effective” when “[t]he conversation is no longer prefaced on, how do we boost economic growth and integration.” Once issues of strategic rivalry and national security became involved, business figures who tried to intervene were likely “to be looked at as suspect in both countries.” On the other side of the world in Beijing, Prof. Shi Yinhong likewise thought such discussions “useless” because, although “capable people from both sides” were still available as “messengers,” in neither country was there the political will to reach any kind of settlement. Susan Shirk, who served as deputy assistant secretary of state for China policy in the 1990s, had grown extremely dubious as to whether either the Chinese or U.S. government was likely to accept advice or suggestions from such interlocutors as herself.77

Downward Spiral


With China still on lockdown, the annual meeting of the National People’s Congress of China, which had originally been scheduled for March 2020, was postponed until June. By that time, the Trump administration was visibly floundering and at a loss in its efforts to defeat the virus or at least to deny its existence, a performance that did nothing to enhance U.S. prestige elsewhere in the world. This highly publicized failure may have been one factor emboldening China to take drastic action on Hong Kong, and to pass on Hong Kong’s behalf wide-ranging if somewhat opaque national security legislation intended to suppress dissent within the troubled and rebellious city. Businesses and tycoons were pressured to support the new law sight unseen, which was not published until after it had been passed, with Hong Kong people denied any opportunity to comment on it or have any input. In an embarrassing demonstration that she was merely an obedient figurehead, even the chief executive did not see the final draft of the law until after it was issued. The fact that the new law had to be introduced and drafted in great secrecy, with officials elsewhere in China left in ignorance of the central government’s intentions until the last moment, was testimony to the fact that all such legislation was so unpopular in Hong Kong that efforts to win approval for it in the Hong Kong legislature would almost certainly have sparked further massive protests. The Chinese government, which already sought to employ colonial-style methods of indirect rule to control Hong Kong, working through malleable local surrogates with ultimate authority retained by the Chinese Liaison Office, had been forced to resort to measures once used by the British in India and elsewhere in their empire to suppress dissent, by passing legislation affecting a colony from the metropole through its own parliament.

The fact that China had to employ these methods was striking evidence of Beijing’s inability to win the hearts and minds of even 7 million Chinese. In the first few weeks after its introduction, the legislation proved reasonably effective in discouraging overt protests, while libraries pulled controversial titles from their shelves. A new outbreak of Covid-19 also brought a resumed lockdown. But simmering dissatisfaction among large swathes of the population seemed unlikely to disappear, so long as underlying grievances and discontents were not addressed, something both the Hong Kong government and Beijing had failed to do. Ample scope remained for the sparking of further confrontations over such issues as the selection in 2022 of the next chief executive or the introduction of “patriotic education” in local schools. And lurking in the background was the question of whether Hong Kong would ever recover its position as the interface between China and international capital and investment, or whether businesses would switch their headquarters operations to the less arbitrary and physically hazardous domicile of Singapore.

Much of the international community, including the United Nations and the European Union, and many Western countries, expressed strong reservations over the passage of the national security law. Britain offered a passage to citizenship for the approximately 3 million holders of British National Overseas passports, bringing threats of retaliation from China. Australia and Taiwan likewise offered new visa options for Hong Kong would-be immigrants, and the United States also contemplated doing so. Britain, Australia, and New Zealand likewise suspended their extradition agreements with the city. The United States went further. Within two weeks, Trump invoked the Hong Kong Autonomy Act and removed Hong Kong’s preferential trade status. The Fulbright scholar and student educational exchange program for China and Hong Kong was ended. Officials in Hong Kong and China who were responsible for suppressing dissent in the territory or in Tibet and Xinjiang were also exposed to sanctions of various kinds, banned from travelling to the United States or from holding U.S. assets. Reports circulated that the United States government contemplated imposing further restrictions on all CCP members and their families that might exclude them from entering, living, working, or studying in the United States.78

Chinese diplomats responded with unappealing menaces and bluster. Australia faced threats of retaliation through such measures as cutting off sales of Australian wine and not allowing Chinese students to enroll in Australian universities, plus vaguer warnings that China would impose reciprocal sanctions, and the customary affirmations that its treatment of Hong Kong was a purely internal Chinese issue, in which external powers and institutions had no standing. Early in July, Liu Xiaoming, China’s ambassador to Britain, facing the prospect that Premier Boris Johnson’s government would offer up to 3 million Hong Kong Chinese holding British National (Overseas) passports the chance to move to Britain, and would also refuse to allow the Chinese flagship company Huawei to provide technology for Britain’s 5-G networks, warned: “China

wants to be UK’s friend and partner. But if you treat China as a hostile country, you will have to bear the consequences.”79 Such unsophisticated efforts at arm-twisting could be self-defeating, prompting their targets harden their position and dig in. Citing not just Liu’s remarkably unsubtle attempt to pressure the British government and people, but also China’s establishment of “Confucius Institutes on British university campuses, under the supervision of China’s propaganda department,” mounting activities and programmes for which foreigners in China would be arrested, Prof. Steve Tsang of the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) warned Britain against “abandon[ing] our basic values as we engage with China. No amount of trade and investment can justify abandonment of our commitment to the rights and dignity of the individual, the rule of law and democratic principles.” Characterizing China’s threats of punishing Britain as genuine and designed “to make the world safe for authoritarianism—a world in which the Communist party’s hold on power in China cannot be challenged,” Tsang urged that Britain “work with our democratic allies to form a united front. Chinese threats to inflict economic pain on an individual democracy become hollow if we all hold the same line and do not allow Beijing to divide and rule.”80

When Britain ignored his remonstrances and went ahead with these measures, Liu held an online press conference in late July in London, where he threatened that China would refuse to recognize the British National (Overseas) passports that up to 3 million Hong Kong people could use, a move that in practice would be almost impossible to implement. (One might also question the logic of forcing dissatisfied Hong Kong residents to remain in a city they found so uncongenial, as opposed to allowing the discontented to leave.) Liu defended China’s disqualification of candidates in the forthcoming Hong Kong Legislative Council elections, as well as its treatment of the Uighurs, presenting videos widely derided as propaganda. He also publicly attacked Britain’s decision to remove from its 5G networks technology provided by the Chinese Huawei firm, warning in the Hong Kong South China Morning Post newspaper that Huawei might reconsider £3 billion of investment in the United Kingdom at a time when the world was facing its worst economic recession in decade.81 By late July, Chinese investors were already showing themselves wary of putting money into Britain, with the TikTok social media firm reportedly dropping plans to build a European headquarters in London and Chinese officials promising further retribution against flagship British brands, including HSBC, Jaguar Land Rover, and Burberry.82 (To make confusion yet worse confounded, in August some Conservative politicians expressed fears that allowing TikTok—by that time under pressure from the Trump administration to sell its U.S. operations to an American rival—to base itself in London might represent a security threat to Britain itself).83

Yet heavy-handed remonstrances from Liu and other Chinese diplomats and economic retaliation also proved rather effective in motivating Western powers to work together to counter China’s influence. Admittedly, Beijing was successful


in blocking a U.S.-backed effort to win endorsement from the United Nations Human Rights Commission of a statement calling on China and Hong Kong “to reconsider the imposition of this legislation and to engage Hong Kong’s people, institutions and judiciary to prevent further erosion of the rights and freedoms that the people of Hong Kong have enjoyed for many years.” The twenty-seven signatories included 15 EU member states, plus Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and Japan. 53 countries, however, signed a statement in support of the national security legislation introduced by Cuba to the Commission. The great majority were from Africa and the Middle East, with Dominica, Nicaragua, and Venezuela the only Latin American signatories, and Asian support restricted to Cambodia, Laos, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, and Sri Lanka. Conspicuously absent on either side were most of East and Southeast Asia, as well as India; Jordan and Israel; almost all of Latin America; and several large African countries, including Angola, Nigeria, and South Africa. Russia, most of Central Asia, Ukraine, the various East European states, Portugal, Spain, Greece, and Italy likewise sat on the fence. The exercise demonstrated the strengths but also the weaknesses and limitations of Chinese diplomacy, with support for the legislation largely confined to authoritarian states, many of them small and poor, a coalition of the needy that were heavily reliant upon Chinese funding and sometimes other kinds of support. In effect, China was getting only what it paid for.

The carefully neutral and non-committal stances of India and the East Asian states on China’s treatment of Hong Kong were perhaps particularly significant. China’s crackdown on Hong Kong went in tandem with an entire suite of more assertive moves on disputes involving neighbors in Asia. On 15 June, Chinese and Indian troops stationed on the contested Himalayan border between the two powers encountered each other in a bloody and brutal clash that left at least 20 Indians and an undisclosed number of Chinese soldiers dead, with others seriously injured. The highly publicized dispute, in a region that sparked a brief border war in October 1962 and had been a flashpoint ever since, stoked ferocious nationalist sentiment in India. China apparently hoped to discourage India’s Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, from moving too close to the United States and collaborating on efforts to contain China’s rise. The episode was more likely to have the opposite impact, especially since India also resented Chinese condescension and the fact that China regarded itself as “being ‘the big brother,’ the only emerging power” in Asia, whereas India sought to be “recognised and respected as equal to China by the international community.”

In July, China increased the number of military warplanes making flights close to Taiwan, provoking not conciliation, but appeals by Taiwan’s Defense Minister for a deterrent in the form of “a clear signal” to China from “international society.” Almost simultaneously, China stepped up its military activities and jurisdictional efforts in the South China Sea, where its claims to the Spratly Islands are disputed by several of its neighbors, and in the East China Sea, close to the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, which are held by Japan but controlled by China. In its annual defense review, published in early July, the Japanese government highlighted and deplored these moves. This white paper also argued that China was using its Belt and Road Initiative to move outward the positions of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in both the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and that it was taking advantage of other nations’ preoccupation with fighting Covid-19 to advance its strategic objectives. It


seemed that, following a brief interval of moderation, China had become more rather than less assertive in furthering its ambitions.

The United States was not slow in responding. Throughout 2019, the working assumption of Chinese negotiators had been that, provided they offered enough economic sweeteners in any trade deal to allow Trump to claim victory, they could easily manage the mercurial but transactional president over the coming five years. After rocky negotiations, phase one of the trade deal was eventually signed on 15 January 2020, and all seemed to have been on track. With the spread of Covid-19—or what Trump in one of his rallies termed the “Kung Flu”—and its deadly impact on Americans and the U.S. economy and, worse still in Trump’s eyes, his re-election prospects, this self-confidence proved misplaced. Speaking at a White House press conference on 23 July, as he faced rising tallies of virus infections and fatalities and U.S. unemployment claims, Trump confessed: “The trade deal means less to me now than it did when I made it. They [China] are setting records. Yesterday was a record corn day, they purchased more corn than any order ever and that went on for two or three days. And soybeans and all, but it just means much less to me. Can you understand that? It just means much less to me.”

China had rarely figured prominently in presidential election campaigns. This time, it would become the villain that everyone loved to hate.

If Trump had been reluctant to abandon hopes of working with China, other prominent members of his administration were far readier to go on the attack. Indeed, in June and July, four top Trump officials delivered speeches outlining what they perceived as the massive and unacceptable threat China presented to U.S. interests. In doing so, they echoed the recommendations put forward in a memoir that General H. R. McMaster, who served just over a year as Trump’s national security adviser in 2017 and early 2018, published in May 2020. Recalling his visit to Beijing with Trump in November 2017, McMaster described how Chinese Premier Li Keqiang had told the presidential party “that China, having already developed its industrial and technological base, no longer needed the United States. He dismissed American concerns over unfair trade and economic practices, indicating that the US’s role in the future global economy would be merely to provide China with raw materials, agricultural products and energy to fuel its production of the world’s cutting-edge industrial and consumer products.” According to McMaster:

The party’s leaders believe they have a narrow window of strategic opportunity to strengthen their rule and revise the international order in their favor—before China’s economy sours, the population grows old and other countries realize that the party is pursuing national rejuvenation at their expense. The party has no intention of playing by the rules associated with international law, trade or commerce. China’s overall strategy relies on co-option and coercion at home and abroad, as well as on concealing the nature of its true intentions.

As a condition of operating within China, McMaster claimed, foreign businesses were forced to hand over intellectual property to their Chinese counterparts. The Belt and Road Initiative was designed to ensnare small countries in debt traps, enabling China to acquire their infrastructure and assets. And the government compelled Chinese companies, researchers, students, and others to carry out espionage in pursuit of its goals. Describing as “strategic narcissism” earlier assumptions that China’s growing integration into the existing international order would prompt domestic liberalization within China itself, McMaster warned:

The CCP is not going to liberalize its economy or its form of government. It is not going to play by commonly accepted international rules—rather, it will attempt to undermine and eventually replace them with rules more sympathetic to

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China’s interests. China will continue to combine its form of economic aggression with a sustained campaign of industrial espionage. It will continue to seek control of strategic geographic locations and establish exclusionary areas of primacy.

He recommended that the United States set tighter controls on technology transfers, and impose sanctions and other penalties on American companies, universities, and research facilities that “knowingly collaborate with China’s efforts to repress its own people or build threatening military capabilities.” Chinese businesses involved in human rights abuses or breaches of international agreements should be denied access to Western capital markets. In addition, Huawei and other Chinese companies should be excluded from Western communications networks. Lastly, he recommended that, by encouraging Chinese to visit and even emigrate, the United States and its allies “should try to maximize positive interactions and experiences with the Chinese people,” since those who wished to establish such contacts were also those “most likely to question their government’s policies.” Meanwhile, host countries should investigate and if necessary, expel envoys of the Ministry of State Security, United Front Work Department, and Chinese Students and Scholars Association who tried to influence Chinese who were studying, working, or living outside China.

Given that Trump had fired him in April 2018, the publication of McMaster’s book was originally expected to be something of an embarrassment for the president.90 Yet in politics and diplomacy, as in love and the theater, timing is all. When his memoir appeared in print, McMaster was hailed for producing a call to action similar to that provided by George F. Kennan in 1947.91 In practice, McMaster anticipated by only a few weeks what would become a sustained campaign by prominent national security figures within the Trump administration to alert Americans to “the challenge the Chinese Communist Party poses to the United States and our allies.” National Security Adviser Robert O’Brien, launching the lecture series in Phoenix, Arizona, in late June 2020, described how the “conventional wisdom” had for several decades been that “[as] China grew richer and stronger . . . the Chinese Communist Party would liberalize to meet the rising democratic aspirations of its people.” This belief, however, “could not have been more wrong,” a “miscalculation” that O’Brien characterized as “the greatest failure of American foreign policy since the 1930s.” Comparing Xi Jinping to Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, O’Brien stated that the CCP sought to control all independent thinking not just within but beyond China’s borders, throughout the world, pressuring American universities, businesses, and film-makers, and collecting data on Americans, either legally or through hacking. It used trade and economic inducements to blackmail other countries and international organizations into supporting its policies. The Trump administration was, O’Brien proclaimed, prepared to work with its allies to “resist the Chinese Communist Party’s efforts to manipulate our people and our governments, damage our economies, and undermine our sovereignty. The days of American passivity and naivety regarding the People’s Republic of China are over.”92


not going to tolerate, much less enable.” Overall, he depicted China as the most serious long-term threat the United States faced on the international stage.93

One week later, Attorney General William P. Barr, speaking at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum in Grand Rapids, Michigan, addressed what he claimed might “prove to be the most important issue for our nation and the world in the twenty-first century—that is, the United States’ response to the global ambitions of the Chinese Communist Party.” Barr proclaimed:

The CCP rules with an iron fist over one of the great ancient civilizations of the world. It seeks to leverage the immense power, productivity, and ingenuity of the Chinese people to overthrow the rules-based international system and to make the world safe for dictatorship. How the United States responds to this challenge will have historic implications and will determine whether the United States and its liberal democratic allies will continue to shape their own destiny or whether the CCP and its autocratic tributaries will control the future.

The Attorney General warned that “China is now engaged in an economic blitzkrieg—an aggressive, orchestrated, whole-of-government (indeed, whole-of-society) campaign to seize the commanding heights of the global economy and to surpass the United States as the world’s preeminent superpower.” To attain this, it used “predatory and often unlawful tactics” while “seek[ing] to dominate key trade routes and infrastructure in Eurasia, Africa, and the Pacific.” It engaged in debt diplomacy to take control of the infrastructure of poor countries. It was also planning to “dominate the world’s digital infrastructure” and win “technological supremacy.” To do so, it forced American companies to hand over their technology to joint ventures. In particular, China wished to dominate global medical and pharmaceutical manufacturing, an objective which impelled hackers to target U.S. research. Summing up, Barr warned that “the ultimate ambition of China’s rulers isn’t to trade with the United States. It is to raid the United States.” Like O’Brien, Wray highlighted Chinese efforts to pressure American businesses and movie studios to conform to Chinese wishes even within the United States and to infiltrate and influence U.S. universities.94

Secretary of State Pompeo, who orchestrated and concluded this series of speeches, was equally uncompromising toward China. Besides forcefully opposing the imposition of the Hong Kong national security law, in July 2020 he publicly denounced China’s claims to the South China Sea and announced that in future, U.S. policy would back the 2016 ruling by the International Court of Justice at The Hague that China’s actions in the region were illegal.95 A few days later, following vehement Chinese protests, Pompeo tweeted: “The United States’ policy is crystal clear: The South China Sea is not China’s

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maritime empire. If Beijing violates international law and free nations do nothing, history shows the CCP will simply take more territory. China Sea disputes must be resolved through international law.96

In the interim, Pompeo too had delivered a wide-ranging address on “Communist China and the Free World’s Future,” on this occasion at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum in Yorba Linda, California, established as a memorial to the president who reopened U.S. relations with China in the early 1970s. Speaking to an audience that included two prominent exiled Chinese dissidents, Wang Dan and Wei Jingsheng, Pompeo asked rhetorically: “What do the American people have to show now 50 years on from engagement with China?” He warned that the United States and other democratic countries had given China special treatment that “resurrected China’s failing economy, only to see Beijing bite the international hands that were feeding it.” China stole American intellectual property and sought to influence in its favor the policies of US corporations and Hollywood studios. Rather than seeing “a Chinese evolution towards freedom and democracy,” the world faced a China that was “increasingly authoritarian at home, and more aggressive in its hostility to freedom everywhere else.” The Trump administration was no longer prepared to emulate many of its predecessors and “cave to [China’s] demands.” Instead, Pompeo argued, the United States must “mistrust and verify. We, the freedom-loving nations of the world, must induce China to change, just as President Nixon wanted. We must induce China to change in more creative and assertive ways, because Beijing’s actions threaten our people and our prosperity.” Pompeo cautioned that many Chinese companies and students were not “normal” but controlled by the CCP, and sought to steal American intellectual property. Likewise, the PLA existed “to uphold the absolute rule of the Chinese Communist Party elites and expand a Chinese empire, not to protect the Chinese people.” In future, he proclaimed, the United States would be far more assertive in withstanding Chinese economic and military pressure and opposing any further spread of PRC power and influence. He called upon U.S. allies to do likewise.97

By the time Pompeo visited the Nixon Library, Sino-U.S. relations had deteriorated still further. In response to what was claimed to be the involvement of China’s Consulate in Houston, Texas, in facilitating espionage in the United States by researchers covertly working for the PLA, on 22 July the Trump administration ordered that the consulate be closed within 72 hours.98 Chinese diplomats protested unavailingly, and then quite predictably responded by ordering that the U.S. Consulate in Chengdu, in China’s southwestern Sichuan province, likewise cease operations. By the morning of 27 July, both facilities were empty, their doors shut. Each targeted diplomatic outpost was relatively small, as opposed to the embassies in the two capital cities and larger consulates in New York, San Francisco, and Chicago, or Hong Kong and Shanghai. Yet the episode marked yet another ratcheting up of tensions between these two major powers. Shi Yinhong of Renmin University gloomily described Pompeo’s speech, delivered as harried diplomats in each mission hastened to clear the buildings, as “the new Cold War declaration of the United States. And the world is divided into two: Start anew and carry out all aspects of competition and confrontation with China.” Even the normally nationalistic Global Times, while unwilling to concede that China should not respond, glumly remarked that “taking countermeasures every time will force China and the United States to drift farther apart the more they fight, and accelerate their ‘decoupling.’”99

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Reports existed that this was indeed exactly what Pompeo and his associates intended. Conscious that Trump might well lose the election and have to leave office in January 2021, they apparently sought to push tensions between China and the United States to the point where the breach became irreversible. Ryan Hass of the Brookings Institution, National Security Council China director under President Barack Obama, argued: “Below the president, Secretary Pompeo and other members of the administration appear to have broader goals. They want to reorient the U.S.-China relationship toward an all-encompassing systemic rivalry that cannot be reversed by the outcome of the upcoming U.S. election. They believe this reorientation is needed to put the United States on a competitive footing against its 21st-century geostrategic rival.” This approach might in one way seem to confirm what some PRC officials and commentators had already contended, that the United States would never acquiesce in China’s ascendency. Yet less confrontational Foreign Ministry voices within China, fearing the relationship might spiral yet further downward, still urged the United States to reconsider its policies and embrace a more cooperative ethos. Realistically, many Chinese officials and pundits now expected that, at least until the forthcoming presidential election was decided, nothing was likely to change. One analyst in Beijing concluded: “There is very little China can do to take the initiative. It has very few proactive options.” On the American side, some expected that following the election, influential business figures with links to both the Republican and Democratic parties would push to reduce growing antagonisms. But it remained problematic whether they would succeed, given that American and multinational firms were now coming under attack for what Pompeo termed “corporate appeasement” of China.100

Almost immediately, Pompeo attracted heavy criticism from less extreme figures within the U.S. foreign policy elite, notably Prof. Thomas Wright of the Brookings Institution, for being overly simplistic and unsophisticated in his portrayal of China and the policies he advocated the United States should follow to counter Chinese ambitions. Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, likewise assailed the Trump administration for “undermining prospects for moderating China’s behavior” by weakening international institutions that might have helped to brake Chinese policies and failing to act with allies to restrain China.101 Yet both Wright and Haass were fundamentally in agreement that the United States should seek to rein in China; in effect, they were complaining that the policies Trump officials had followed since January 2017 had been so poorly conceived that they had proved ineffective in achieving this objective.

Throughout 2019 and the first half of 2020, debate had raged among U.S. policy intellectuals over how best to handle the relationship with China. Several other camps vied with the hard-line China hawks. Representatives of each contributed to Foreign Affairs in spring 2020. Wright advocated forceful action to combat Chinese ambitions, undertaken in collaboration with U.S. allies in Asia and Europe.102 Graham Allison urged the United States to accept a division of the world into spheres of influence, resigning itself to China’s predominance in East Asia and to Russia hegemony over its smaller neighbors in Europe and possibly the Middle East.103 Stephen Wertheim, based at Columbia University and deputy director of the recently established Quincy Institute, suggested that the United States should massively reduce its military budget and commitments, increase social welfare spending, and focus on such issues as climate change and taming global corporate


power and finance. He hoped that these fundamental alterations in the U.S. international outlook would in turn elicit greater cooperation and moderation from both China and Russia.104

Increasingly, it seems as if the stresses of Covid-19 have brought a definitive reorientation of the international posture of the United States toward a more combative relationship with China. With the situation in freefall, the question is rapidly becoming just how far their antagonism would go before hitting bottom. Robert Lawrence Kuhn, an investment banker and writer with close ties to China, warned recently that current political attacks upon China in the United States have gone far beyond the standard election-year rhetoric, when candidates such as Bill Clinton and then George W. Bush attacked the previous administration’s China policies as too conciliatory when campaigning, only to adopt a close variant of the same approach once in office. While still hoping that 2021 will bring “a window of opportunity . . . to reset relations,” he also cautioned that “there is no going back to the halcyon days of amiable US-China relations.”105 Susan Shirk, deputy assistant secretary of state for China policy during the Clinton administration, anticipated that, should the Democratic candidate Joseph W. Biden defeat Trump, he would abandon the “sledgehammer approach” favored by the current administration and “try to negotiate priority issues . . . and preserve space for cooperation on health, climate and non-proliferation.” But she nonetheless doubted whether China, given that its present leader is likely to remain in office “indefinitely,” could likewise “do a reset” of its policies.106 If the slew of assertive moves by China in June were indeed undertaken on Xi Jinping’s direction, prospects on either side for any real compromise may be slim to non-existent. Chinese diplomats’ insistence in summer 2020 that—in the title of a speech Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng made in July—“[t]he trend toward China-U.S. cooperation is unstoppable” seemed something of an exercise in wilful denial and self-deception.107

Even during a pandemic, China’s neighbors are proving surprisingly resilient and willing to resist further expansions of its regional power, while U.S. calls to oppose Chinese demands have won perhaps unexpected resonance within Asia and even beyond. Reinforcing Pompeo’s rejection earlier in July of the legality of China’s maritime claims to the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, Australia followed suit with a formal Note Verbale on the subject declaring that China’s position was “not valid under international law.” Australia also raised the issue of competing claims by other nations to the Paracel Islands.108 In a joint statement, Australia pledged to increase defense cooperation with the United States, though leaving it open whether it would increase naval and air patrols in the disputed waters. The two countries also expressed “deep concern” on a number of Chinese policies, including the campaign of repression against the Uighurs.109 On another front, Britain banned the use in its national 5G network of technology from the giant Chinese firm Huawei, a reversal that owed much to U.S.


pressure, but also reflected growing distrust of China over Hong Kong and Xinjiang among British elites and the general public.110

The United States still enjoys one great advantage. From the time Trump took office, his administration had berated, belittled, insulted, humiliated, deceived, let down, and at times outright betrayed virtually all its friends and allies, with the mercurial and erratic president setting the tone and taking the lead. Yet, such provocations notwithstanding, American allies have not entirely abandoned hope; the victims or at least injured parties are not yet convinced that divorce is inevitable.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in Asia, where Thailand and the Philippines are formal treaty allies of the United States and Singapore a long-term, reliable, and effective security partner. Writing in Foreign Affairs in summer 2019, Lee Hsien Loong, the widely respected premier of Singapore, urged the United States and China to “work out a modus vivendi that will be competitive in some areas without allowing rivalry to poison cooperation in others.” He bluntly warned: “Asian countries do not want to be forced to choose between the two.” Efforts by the United States to block China’s rise or by Beijing to “build an exclusive sphere of influence in Asia” would simply provoke a decades-long confrontation that would jeopardize “the long-heralded Asian century.” Lee went so far as to say that “Asia’s stability and prosperity” had been possible only because of the “open, integrated, and rules-based global order” and “security umbrella” provided by the United States. Calling upon the two big powers to accommodate and if possible, collaborate with each other, he also bluntly stated: “The U.S. security presence remains vital to the Asia-Pacific region.” Without it, Japan and South Korea might well acquire nuclear weapons of their own. Lee highlighted China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea as one reason why other powers with competing claims there would not welcome a Chinese naval presence but found that of the United States acceptable. Nor, he warned, could China expect to “displace the United States’ economic role in Asia.” Indeed, Lee stated, Asian nations “regard the United States as a resident power with vital interests in the region” and welcomed the American decision to build up its Indo-Pacific Command. They also expected to take on more of the burden of their own defense costs. Lee further hoped and anticipated that Japan and India would both take greater roles in Asia. While conciliatory in tone toward both China and the United States, Lee made it very clear just how misplaced was Chinese confidence that its neighbors would simply acquiesce in its efforts to gain regional hegemony and eject the United States from Asia.111

China’s bellicose actions were indeed provoking growing resentment and a willingness to push back and retaliate in kind, heightening tensions. As talks between India and China that were intended to resolve the recent border clash continued, in late July 2020 the Indian Army considered the possibility of seizing Chinese positions.112 Leaders of Indian technological industries pushed Prime Minister Narendra Modi to impose further restrictions on China’s access to Indian telecommunications and online markets. In the words of one Indian tycoon, Yashish Dahiya of Policybazaar, “China has long been the bratty kid who thinks it’s OK to grab others’ cake without sharing your own. . . . A sovereign nation has no parent but someone’s got to stop China from misbehaving.”113


In Indian Premier Narendra Modi, Xi Jinping faced a leader as nationalist as himself. To popular acclaim, on 29 July the first five of 36 Rafale fighter jets India had ordered from France arrived in India, hailed by the defense minister as marking “the beginning of a new era in our history.” India anticipated purchasing at least 150 combat aircraft in the near future, part of a major upgrade intended to enhance its military capabilities against China and Pakistan, its long-time rivals.\(^{114}\) India also dispatched 35,000 further troops to reinforce its contested Himalayan border with China, a sign that no early resolution of the conflicts there was expected.\(^{115}\) Although the Chinese and Indian foreign ministers met in Moscow in early September and reached a “five-point consensus” on the de-escalation of tensions, one month later each side was boosting strategic infrastructure in sensitive border areas under its own control, while accusing the other of unjustified expansion and encroachments.\(^{116}\) Both countries, meanwhile, embarked on military exercises that seemed designed to undercut the purported diplomatic understanding between them.\(^{117}\) As Sino-Indian relations continued to deteriorate, Modi moved closer to the United States and its allies, displaying new interest in the prospect of strengthening the Quadrilateral Security Partnership or “Quad,” a diplomatic and potentially defense and security axis of Japan, India, Australia, and the United States first advocated in 2007 by then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.\(^{118}\)

Other Asian states were equally alienated by China’s pretensions. As noted above, Japan was already complaining of China’s “relentless” incursions in the East China Sea and of constant probes of Japanese airspace by Chinese aircraft. Speculation rose whether the Japanese premier would cancel a scheduled visit by Xi Jinping. Japan also imposed tougher restrictions on access to advanced technology by foreign researchers and students enrolled in Japanese universities, a move observers believe was intended to prevent data theft by Chinese and North Koreans.\(^{119}\) In late July, Malaysia publicly denounced “China’s claims to historic rights, or other sovereign rights or jurisdiction, with respect to the maritime areas of the South China Sea encompassed by the relevant part of the ‘nine-dash line’.” The Malaysian government warned that China’s assertions contravened the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea were “without lawful effect to the extent that they


One militarily weaker Asian power vacillated and was initially more circumspect. In late July 2020, President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines said publicly that, despite Philippine claims in the South China Sea, “China is claiming it. We are claiming it. China has the arms. We do not have it. So, it’s as simple as that. They are in possession of the property... so what can we do?” He did not believe his country could “afford” to go to war with China. Although Duterte had previously seemed amenable to proposals that the United States might regain its former Philippine naval base at Subic Bay, in his annual State of the Nation Address, he expressed fears that, should the Philippines allow this, the American presence might embroil the host country in a conflict that would destroy it. These publicly expressed and rather frank misgivings made it clear that, even if his government was yielding to force majeure, it did so only reluctantly and might well change tactics should circumstances permit. Like most ASEAN members, in mid-2020 the Philippines was performing a delicate balancing act between China and the United States, pursuing its own interests and unwilling to alienate or repudiate either big power.

Within a month, Philippine officials had become far more outspoken. In late August, following a telephone conversation with Secretary of State Pompeo, Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin assertively announced that his country now planned to mount naval and air patrols within the South China Sea areas claimed by China, and that, in case of attack by Chinese forces, the Philippines would invoke its Mutual Defense Treaty with the United States. Addressing the United Nations in September, Duterte expressed strong agreement with the 2016 International Court of Justice ruling rejecting most of China’s claims to the South China Sea. In mid-October, the Philippines announced its intention of resuming drilling for oil and gas in the area. Following clashes between Chinese and Philippine fishermen, in late October the Philippine navy announced plans to deploy 240 maritime militiamen to patrol the disputed waters.

Other nations were just as resentful of Chinese maritime activities. In the southern hemisphere, approximately 15,700 miles away from the Chinese mainland, the Ecuadorian navy went on full alert in summer 2020 as a fleet of hundreds of Chinese


125 John Reed and Katherine Hille, “Philippines to Restart Oil and Gas Exploration in South China Sea,” Financial Times, 18 October 2020, [https://www.ft.com/content/b361af9-9-9a2-461a-b8ea-d8f8850dd6a](https://www.ft.com/content/b361af9-9-9a2-461a-b8ea-d8f8850dd6a).

fishing vessels hovered just outside the 200-mile limits of the territorial waters of the Galápagos Islands. Unchecked industrial-scale fishing threatened to disrupt the delicate environmental marine balance in the surrounding ocean, home to numerous rare species, including endangered sharks. The story quickly made international headlines, further enhancing China’s image as a predatory, irresponsible, greedy, and destructive rogue actor on the global scene. Moves to establish a broader protective zone around Ecuador and the islands were quickly set on foot, as calls grew for the withdrawal of the Chinese trawlers.127 The episode focused international attention upon the apparently unchecked expansion of China’s distant-water commercial fishing fleet, estimated to have grown to 16,996—as opposed to an official 3,000—vessels, and the environmental degradation and depletion of fishing stocks and maritime life across the world’s oceans that Chinese overfishing was causing. Although the Chinese government then instituted two three-month moratoriums near the Galápagos and in the South Atlantic off the Argentine coast, these measures seemed only token gestures.128 In October, after the Chinese had hauled up many thousands of tonnes of fish and squid, including species integral to food chains within the Galápagos, while jettisoning massive amounts of environmentally dangerous plastic garbage that washed up on the islands’ shores, the mayor of Santa Cruz province in the Galápagos complained: “This is an attack on our resources. They are killing the species we have protected and polluting our biota with the plastic waste they drop overboard. They are raping the Galápagos.”129

Meanwhile, in October 2020, thousands of Chinese fishing boats entered and refused to leave Japan’s exclusive economic zone in the Pacific off its northeast coast. As Japan instructed its own fishermen to avoid clashes and withdraw, these activities aroused fears that China was testing Japan’s broader resolve to defend its maritime claims against Chinese incursions.130 If so, the timing was particularly sensitive, coming just a month after the unexpected resignation in mid-September of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his replacement by Yoshihide Suga, still something of an unknown quantity as premier, with little experience in foreign affairs. One week after taking office, in a conversation with Xi Jinping, Suga had expressed his belief that high-level contacts and “stable relations” between China and Japan were “important not just for our countries but for the region and the international community.” The two leaders had not, however, set any date for a long-deferred state visit by Xi to Japan.131

In his early days in office, Suga initially seemed to be trying to strike a delicate balance between China and the United States. Following his first conversation with the U.S. president, a few days earlier, Suga told reporters: “I told [Trump] the Japan-
U.S. alliance was the foundation of regional peace and stability. We agreed to coordinate closely.”132 Less than three weeks later, Tokyo hosted a meeting of the foreign ministers of the Quadrilateral Security Partnership. Somewhat ineffective in its early years, since 2017 the “Quad” had experienced a revival. The four powers discussed means of strengthening their security cooperation, with Australia agreeing to take part in the forthcoming trilateral Malabar naval exercises India, Japan, and the United States had scheduled for November 2020.133 One week later, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi, making a tour of five ASEAN nations in an effort to shore up China’s regional standing, fiercely condemned U.S. strategy in Asia as an effort to “build a so-called Indo-Pacific Nato underpinned by the quadrilateral mechanism involving the United States, Japan, India and Australia. What it pursues is to trumpet the Cold War mentality and to stir up confrontation among different groups and blocs and to stoke geopolitical competition. What it maintains is the dominance and hegemonic system of the United States.”134

Wang’s harsh rhetoric was a sign of Chinese alarm over the potential revitalization of this once ineffective multilateral organization.135 American allies could—despite the Trump administration’s erratic policies-- nonetheless be forgiven for regarding such an arrangement as a safeguard against Chinese pressure. In response to the Japanese fisheries dispute, on 23 October, ten days before the forthcoming U.S. elections, National Security Adviser Robert O’Brien publicly proclaimed in Washington:

The United States is a Pacific power. The People’s Republic of China’s illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, and harassment of vessels operating in the exclusive economic zones of other countries in the Indo-Pacific, threatens our sovereignty, as well as the sovereignty of our Pacific neighbors and endangers regional stability. Efforts of the United States Government, including the United States Coast Guard (USCG) are critical to countering these destabilizing and malign actions.

O’Brien announced that as a deterrent, the United States planned to deploy vessels from its own Coast Guard in the western Pacific.136 In autumn 2020, as the U.S. presidential election approached, China seemed almost hell-bent on proving that in

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reality it was even worse than its harshest critics alleged. This in turn gave further ammunition to its opponents in and beyond the United States, prompting ever tougher reactions to Chinese demands.

**Conclusion: Is the Trap Closing Its Jaws?**

Could either or both sides have chosen different paths? Steve Chan, in his chapter in the anthology on the Thucydides trap reviewed here, noted that there is at least one relatively recent example of a hegemonic world power that surrendered the mantle to a successor without a war for supremacy: the replacement of the British empire by the United States that occurred during the mid-twentieth century. Strains and tensions undoubtedly disturbed the Anglo-American relationship, but what the Cambridge historian David Reynolds has termed “competitive co-operation” was its fundamental *modus operandi*. From the late nineteenth century onward, British leaders recognized that their empire faced a number of would-be rivals, and that *de facto* cooperation if not alliance with the United States represented the best means of preserving their position. The transfer of power from Britain to the United States was mediated and facilitated by the existence at numerous levels of a wide range of personal and non-governmental contacts and transnational networks, informal links that were often utilized to promote understanding on both sides—especially during crises—and to develop shared policies. These bonds embraced family ties, including marital alliances at all social levels, from the elite down; educational exchanges, with the Rhodes Scholarships at Oxford University only the best known of a wide range; business links, especially in the financial and commercial sector; and cultural and intellectual interchanges. Buttressing these was a sense that the two countries shared a common political and literary heritage, roots, and values. Though not identical twins, they were by and large on the same page.

Far greater differences divided and still separate China and the United States and, more broadly, China and Western liberal powers. Thirty years of very limited contacts between the late 1940s and the late 1970s did much to thin the ranks of those Chinese with personal experience of the non-Communist world, leaving encounters with Westerners largely limited to sympathetic fellow-travellers, diplomats, occasional participants in scientific and cultural exchanges, and a few eccentrics. From the late 1970s onward, Chinese elites showed impressive determination in familiarizing themselves with the influential corridors of power and economic and intellectual institutions within the international system and the major Western nations, an infrastructure that did much to frame policy discourse and set norms, but proved far less skilled in understanding less exalted spheres or navigating and operating at less rarefied levels. Despite sporadic efforts to reach broader audiences, notably by establishing Confucius Institutes, Chinese officialdom rather clearly found hobnobbing at Davos with Fortune 500 executives more congenial than cultivating the grassroots and building more broadly based support. Crude efforts to bully and pressure non-Chinese individuals and institutions that failed to toe the party line proved self-defeating and provoked significant backlash against China at multiple levels. Thucydides, as Kirshner perceptively notes, treated “[r]egime type” as “a crucial explanatory variable” and stressed the importance of “national character” as a further explanatory factor. Ominously, he “also expected democracies to behave differently than nondemocracies and not necessarily in a good way.” He thought them liable to “be carried away by the malevolent schemes of charismatic demagogues.” (6) In recent years, the latter have indeed been much in evidence, with no sign that many such figures are likely to disappear or lose credibility in the near future.

Although the process of Chinese policymaking at the highest levels is often described as occurring in a ‘black box’ impenetrable to outside observers, one plausible theory is that China, seeing the rest of the world preoccupied with battling...
Covid-19 and the United States in particular disabled not just by an erratic and incompetent leader but by ongoing protests over racial inequities and brutality, decided to go for broke and move decisively to achieve its long-term strategic objectives in Asia, emerging victorious and forcing other powers to accept unpalatable *faits accomplis* as the new *status quo*. This is beginning to seem a decided miscalculation. On the international front and perhaps even domestically, China now appears to be facing a potential perfect storm of adversity, with cascading setbacks and difficulties compounding each other.

Debate is still raging over whether and if so in what respects the current Sino-American impasse resembles the Cold War between two international camps spearheaded by the United States and the Soviet Union that developed following World War II. One clear dissimilarity is that, with the exception of the United States, the preceding war had inflicted massive damage on most major powers, leaving an international power vacuum in both Europe and Asia. The Cold War system that emerged reflected the need to construct a viable new system, what is now commonly termed the liberal international order. The current situation does not arise from comparable devastation; indeed, one great preoccupation of those on the sidelines is how to prevent a downward spiral into a crisis that might spark outright conflict between nuclear-armed powers.

There is, however, one interesting commonality. The Norwegian historian Geir Lundestad has described the United States during the Cold War as presiding over what he termed an “empire by invitation.” Whether this is an accurate characterization of the U.S. position in the Middle East, Latin America, or indeed even in Asia during the Cold War’s early years seems somewhat problematic. In Europe, however, there can be little doubt that the Western powers, weakened by war and faced with the prospect of Soviet domination, welcomed not just economic assistance from the United States but also a formal military alliance and security guarantee assuring them of protection from across the Atlantic. Indeed, elites in Britain and other European powers actively sought and encouraged U.S. involvement on the continent. Whatever the faults and flaws of the United States, coming under American hegemony in Europe was far better than the Soviet alternative. The very fact that NATO survived the end of the Cold War, with states that previously been under Soviet domination queuing up to join, while the Warsaw Pact was dissolved without regret, was tribute to the tangible benefits that accrued to member states.

This relatively benign view of the United States still holds. At present, long-term American allies in Asia and to a considerable degree in Europe, though often shocked—even shell-shocked—by developments during the Trump years, have not yet written off the United States as a useful asset. Rather, despite being decidedly wary as to whether the United States can fully recover a stability that has been conspicuously absent during the current administration, they are still living in hope that the Trump presidency may prove a distressing aberration. What has become the distinct possibility that Joseph W. Biden rather than Trump may win the forthcoming presidential election is for most undoubtedly a reason for optimism. This is not to say that American and European powers wish to fall into rank behind the United States in a semi-permanent antagonistic global confrontation with China that splits the world into two, mutually hostile camps. Most—as also happened during the Cold War, when European allies frequently felt the United States was too hostile towards the Soviet Union—would prefer a more restrained and nuanced American approach toward the perceived adversary than that currently in evidence. But the heft that the United States still possesses is seen as essential to any credible attempt to moderate what is perceived as China’s growing and increasingly menacing assertiveness. This eagerness of other nations to have the United States on board, recent alarming vagaries in its policies notwithstanding, is one major advantage that China almost entirely lacks. China may be too big to ignore, but much of the rest of the world simply wants its money, resignedly accepts that China is too large a player to exclude, or both. For the PRC, admiration and fungible soft power is in rather short supply.

Chairman Mao Zedong habitually used external crises, real or imagined, with other powers as an opportunity for disposing of domestic opponents and tightening internal party social and economic control. When China, for example, intervened in the Korean War in late 1950, little more than a year after the establishment of the PRC, non-Communist elements within

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China were targeted for suppression and re-education. On this occasion, Chinese troops fought United Nations forces under a U.S. commander that included contingents from not just the United States, but also Great Britain, several NATO allies, and Australia and New Zealand. Mao himself was apparently the driving force behind China’s entry into this war, a costly venture which ended in a stalemate. It may be that the chastening experience of this undertaking was why on later occasions, during the Taiwan straits crises of 1954-1955 and 1958-1959, in practice China showed considerable restraint, meaning that however alarming these episodes seemed at the time, they constituted eye-catching exercises in what was effectively political theater rather than serious campaigns to take Taiwan.

The Sino-Soviet split offered an opportunity for Mao to purge political opponents who disagreed with him from the party, on charges that they were undesirably pro-Soviet. Although the presence of U.S. forces in Vietnam during the 1960s alarmed the Chinese government, Chinese aid to Vietnam was limited to massive material aid and support troops of various kinds, as opposed to direct intervention by combat forces. Apparently, in the mid-1960s China even reached a tacit understanding with the United States that its own involvement would remain limited provided the United States restrained itself to efforts to protect South Vietnam rather than destroy the Northern regime. But Mao liked to keep his crises strictly within bounds, a shadow theater he could control. When his bellicose attitude toward the Soviet Union went beyond rhetoric in 1969, after Chinese troops provoked bloody clashes on the Sino-Russian border that brought inquiries from Soviet diplomats in Washington as to whether the United States would object to a Soviet strike on Chinese nuclear facilities, Mao panicked. Fearful of a Soviet attack, most of the Politburo decamped to undisclosed locations in remote areas of China, leaving only Premier Zhou Enlai in Beijing to handle the crisis. Within months, China began exploring the possibility of a rapprochement with the United States.

It remains unclear whether or not China will be comparably cautious as tensions with the United States and other nations escalate dramatically. On all sides, scope for miscalculation exists. As the protracted U.S. election campaign proceeded, with the incumbent trailing in the polls, the badly wounded president had some incentive to spring an “October surprise” by provoking a major confrontation with China shortly before the coming election. During July, Chinese and U.S. forces both stepped up naval and air drills and exercises in the South China Sea, with one retired Chinese military officer openly speculating that, in an effort to boost his chances of re-election, Trump might launch a surprise attack on disputed features such as the Scarborough Shoal. At the end of July Susan Curtis, senior South Asia specialist on the US National Security Council, told the Brookings Institution: “The US is willing to accept more risk in the [U.S.-China] relationship, and I think each side will have to get used to these new guidelines that will be directing US policy in the region as we move forward.”


The United States, she explained, planned to strengthen economic and military ties with India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh, and had already concluded a $3 billion arms deal with India.144

For much of the summer, China superficially appeared to be rather pulling its punches in terms of active response to the downward spiral in U.S.-China relations, even as officials steered a fine line between satisfying outspoken Chinese nationalists without further exacerbating an already toxic situation. Speaking in Beijing in early July, Wang Yi, China’s Foreign Minister, expressed alarm that “one of the most important bilateral relations in the world . . . is facing the most serious challenges since the establishment of diplomatic relations.” Calling for the resumption of dialogue, he suggested that think tanks in both China and the United States should draw up three lists, defining bilateral and international issues on which both sides could cooperate; those areas on which they had disagreements but where room for resolution existed; and finally, issues which could not be resolved. “Then we should properly manage those disputes and minimise the damage to relations between the two nations based on the spirit of seeking common ground while reserving differences.” Even at the time, one Chinese analyst in Beijing suggested that, however laudable these suggestions, they “may be too late as it is unlikely that China and the US could return to the track of cooperation because of their own domestic changes.”145

Wang Yi’s slightly desperate appeal had no discernible impact upon the Trump administration’s steadily intensifying anti-China campaign. Damage control soon became the new order of the day, a cause in which Wang and his subordinates displayed a certain moderation. Despite strong albeit formulaic and entirely predictable rhetoric from Chinese Foreign Ministry spokespersons, China retaliated to the closure of its Houston consulate only by shutting down the American diplomatic mission in Chengdu, as opposed to upping the ante by closing the far larger and more important consulate in Hong Kong, as some Chinese super-patriots demanded. The visibly exhausted Wang Yi focused upon multiple efforts to persuade European and Asian powers not to line up behind the United States in pushing relations with China to the point of what Zhu Feng, an international relations expert at Nanjing University, characterized as “the new cold war the US now wants to impose on China.”146 Ironically, such conversations also provided Wang’s interlocutors with an ideal opportunity to express their dissatisfaction with China’s policies in various areas, including Hong Kong, human rights, and trade policy. Yet, in the words of the Shanghai-based Chinese scholar Shen Dingli: “This has become an infinite loop of action and reaction, and every step of it is taking Sino-US ties closer to the edge of a breaking in ties. As long as neither country says, ‘We will not make any moves after being attacked,’ then this loop obviously will not stop.”147

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Whether Wang’s initiatives had any tangible effect upon Chinese policies, which were the real causes of contention, was also questionable. In Hong Kong, late July brought arrests of youthful members of pro-independence groups, while the University of Hong Kong sacked associate professor of law Benny Tai, a leading democracy advocate who had for several years been a top strategist within the protest movement. Hong Kong Baptist University declined to renew the employment contract of another protest leader. Government rulings disqualified at least a dozen pro-democracy incumbent legislators and would-be candidates from contesting seats in forthcoming Legislative Council elections, prompting international condemnation and calls for additional sanctions on Hong Kong. As a third wave of Covid-19 spread across Hong Kong, the chief executive went further, postponing for an entire year the elections scheduled for September 2020, in which anti-government forces had been expected to score major wins. More high-profile arrests of Hong Kong protesters and political activists for breaches of the new national security legislation followed, while Chinese marine police intercepted and took into custody 12 democracy advocates from Hong Kong who sought to flee by boat to Taiwan, but now faced the prospect of standing trial in mainland courts. An additional nine individuals accused of assisting the fugitives to leave were arrested in Hong Kong.49

No further attempt was made to disguise just how directly mainland Chinese functionaries were dictating the course of affairs in Hong Kong. Mrs. Carrie Lam, the chief executive, postponed her annual policy address from mid-October to late November, so that she could visit Beijing and receive detailed guidance from the leadership there on the measures she planned to announce.50 Increasingly, real authority in Hong Kong was perceived as resting with the head of the Chinese Liaison Office in the city, with pro-Beijing legislators relaying the information in October 2020 that this body now expected the “reform” of Hong Kong’s education system, judiciary, and social services to be the territory’s top priorities.51

By early autumn 2020, prospects for any real improvement of China’s relations with not just the United States but with numerous other countries seemed ever more remote. On 30 July, the European Union imposed its first ever sanctions in


retaliation for cyber-attacks and espionage, targeting two Chinese nationals and one firm, as well as North Korean and Russian operatives and businesses. A few weeks afterwards, in late August 2020, Wang Yi spent a week touring five European countries—France, Germany, Italy, Norway, and the Netherlands—in a somewhat unrewarding effort to persuade them to support Chinese policies. Articulate Hong Kong protesters shadowed him, while the German foreign minister rebuked him for threats of unspecified retaliation against Norway, should the Nobel Peace Prize be awarded to Hong Kong democracy activists, and against the Czech Republic following a visit to Taiwan by the speaker of the Czech senate. European leaders also called upon China to rescind Hong Kong’s national security law and hold local elections there as soon as possible. Much to China’s annoyance, leading European states were willing to grant political asylum to fugitives wanted by the Hong Kong government, and to ease immigration entry requirements for other Hong Kong people who decided to leave the territory. In the Asia-Pacific area, Germany and France also planned to reinforce defense ties with India, Australia, and Japan.

Overall, a major European and Asian reassessment of relations with China was underway, a development against which Wang’s whistle-stop charm offensive proved largely futile. A new Pew Research Center survey, released in early October 2020 and covering 14 countries, including the United States and Canada, leading European nations, plus Australia, South Korea, and Japan, revealed that in all these countries, majorities ranging from 70 percent in the Netherlands to a high of 84 percent in Japan took a negative view of China, figures that had increased significantly over the previous twelve months. The tangible limits upon Chinese influence and credibility were being demonstrated. Nor were there any signs of cutbacks in Chinese military activities in disputed areas. Whatever conciliatory rhetoric China’s foreign minister chose to employ seemed largely cosmetic in nature, perhaps even a smokescreen intended to disguise the realities of Chinese actions on the ground, at sea, and in the air and win time for these to succeed.

Increasingly, in most Western countries, even the default middle-of-the-road approach might be aptly described as “when necessary, hold your nose and work with China.” This posture was advocated by those such as Michael Swaine of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, who argued that the United States could not simply de-couple from China, especially since cooperation on some transnational concerns, notably environmental, climate-related, and health matters, cannot be avoided. While advising that U.S. officials and leaders should dial down ever more extreme hostile rhetoric and

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tit-for-tat moves against China, Swaine also urged the United States to work in close coordination with likeminded allies to restrain a wide array of Chinese excesses.  

A comparably nuanced approach characterized a report published in July 2020 under the auspices of the British Foreign Policy Group, a London-based independent think tank. The authors, Sophia Gaston of the London School of Economics and Prof. Rana Mitter of Oxford University, urged that continuing engagement with China should go hand-in-hand with a greater awareness of potential security risks, and urged unquestioning British backing for such liberal values as "diversity, dissent, the rule of law and media freedoms." This should include "support for British media operating in China and Hong Kong, and reporting in these regions, and absolutely no room for ambiguity about Britain’s leading role in the defence of media freedoms, and free speech more broadly." The report also advocated the need to “safeguard national interests and . . . be fully aware of the security implications of investment and technological cooperation with China.” It suggested that Britain must “[s]tudy the experiences of other nations at a more advanced stage of their engagement with China, such as Australia, and be fully aware of the sophisticated manner in which economic and political coercion can develop.” In addition, the report thought it essential “that the UK assesses, recognises and then uses its defence and diplomatic capabilities more creatively and productively in the Asia-Pacific, working alongside allies old and new to uphold freedoms, the supremacy of international law, and to support democracy in the region.”

As tensions rose ever higher, the influential Rand Corporation think tank published a report for the U.S. military that sought to predict how successful China would be in accomplishing its stated goals by 2050. Discussing four potential scenarios—envisaging China alternatively entirely triumphant, ascendant, stagnant, or imploding—the authors anticipated that in thirty years’ time China would probably be either ascendant or stagnant, but advised that the United States should also prepare for a “triumphant” China. The report argued that any chance of “close partnership” between China and the United States had always been unlikely but had now “faded from even remote possibility.” Predicting continuing increases in Chinese defense budgets for at least the next ten to fifteen years, Rand recommended that the United States boost its own military spending in the Indo-Pacific area and enhance its joint-force combat capabilities. According to a recent Pew Research Survey, 73 percent of Americans held unfavorable or very unfavorable views of China and believed the United States should act more forcefully to try to protect human rights within China, even if this carried an economic price-tag. Even more blamed the Chinese government for the spread of Covid-19 and had “little or no confidence” in President Xi Jinping’s policies in every sphere. Commentators in Washington think tanks strongly suspected that Chinese views of the United States were equally negative.

Despite Trump’s temperamental volatility and what appeared to be growing political setbacks, at least until late October, it seemed increasingly unlikely that the president—even after he himself was briefly hospitalized with Covid-19—would provoke a fullscale military crisis with China before the polls closed. (Ironically, as the Republicans sought to tar Biden’s son Hunter with winning lucrative corporate sweetheart arrangements from Chinese firms while his father was vice-president, reports emerged that in the decade before he became president, Trump himself had pursued extensive business opportunities...


in China, to the point where he maintained a Chinese bank account and even paid significant sums in Chinese taxes). Instead, concern shifted to the possibility that, should he go down to defeat, a vindictive spirit of retaliation might impel Trump to allow the China hawks within his administration to push relations with China to a state of near irretrievable crisis. By late October, the downward trajectory of China’s relations with numerous other countries appeared if anything to be accelerating.

It is widely and probably accurately believed that fundamental authority over all aspects of Chinese policy rests with President Xi Jinping and his close advisers. Almost certainly, none anticipated how challenging a situation their country would encounter by summer 2020. While discrediting China internationally and bringing calls for China to pay compensation, the Covid-19 pandemic seems to have emboldened top Chinese leaders to go for broke and exploit what they perceived as a happy accident that offered multiple advantageous opportunities for them to lock in physical control and predominance across much of the Asia-Pacific area. This ostensibly smart response to an unexpected and outwardly promising situation is beginning to seem uncomfortably like a major misjudgment, an egregious exercise in strategic overstretch on several fronts simultaneously.

Hong Kong may be temporarily quelled, but the fundamental problems remain, and even though China avoided turning to the PLA to restore order, Chinese actions there have done massive damage to the PRC’s international reputation. Chinese leaders may indeed have chosen to destroy the village in order to save it, as growing numbers of well qualified Hong Kong people and expatriates decide to leave and major businesses contemplate moving many of their operations to more predictable and congenial locations. China’s attempts to block United Nations criticism soon proved unavailing. On 1 September 2020, seven UN human rights rapporteurs and working groups submitted a joint open letter to the Chinese government, questioning numerous aspects of the Hong Kong national security law as contravening international legal obligations to which the People’s Republic claimed to adhere. The rapporteurs called for an independent review of the provisions of the national security law, “to ensure the law is in compliance with China’s international human rights obligations.” While China declined to respond, it was powerless to prevent the publication of this letter. One month later, on 7 October, 39 largely Western countries—led by Germany and including Japan—publicly criticized China’s human rights record, especially policies toward both the Uighurs and Hong Kong. Speaking in the United Nations General Assembly, Christoph Heusgen, Germany’s ambassador to the organization, called upon the world to accord the Uighurs refugee status and accept would-be immigrants from Hong Kong.


Largely thanks to events in Hong Kong, the strategy of regaining Taiwan through intimidation, by persuading Taiwan that resistance to reunification with China is impossible, lies in ruins, while President Tsai Ing-wen’s political standing has greatly improved.163 (In any good spy thriller, Hong Kong’s hapless chief executive Mrs. Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor would fall under suspicion of being a long-time Taiwan sleeper agent, on a covert mission to promote the island’s independence.) Over fierce Chinese objections, in August, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar became the highest-ranking cabinet-level U.S. official to visit Taiwan since the United States withdrew formal diplomatic recognition from the island, leading China to send fighter jets beyond the midway dividing line in the Taiwan Strait that both sides normally treated as the de facto aviation buffer between themselves. Azar and President Tsai pledged to enhance cooperation in the areas of health and commerce.164

China ostentatiously sought to increase military pressure on Taiwan, boosting and upgrading the stock of missiles based in Chinese coastal areas opposite Taiwan and holding large-scale military exercises in close proximity to the island, some timed to coincide with Taiwan’s national day holiday, as President Xi Jinping exhorted Chinese marine forces to enhance their training and combat readiness and be prepared for action.165 The war of nerves failed to induce Taiwan to yield to mainland persuasions. In late October, the U.S. State Department approved a US$1.8 billion arms deal allowing the island’s government to purchase 135 Boeing-made precision land attack missiles and other advanced weaponry, boosting its ability to inflict massive retributory damage on China should the mainland seek to invade. Predictably, Chinese officials protested vehemently.166 A few days later, as China imposed retaliatory sanctions upon several major American firms, including Boeing, Lockheed Martin, and Raytheon Technology, the State Department approved an additional US$2.4 billion package of 400 Harpoon anti-ship missiles, plus support systems, weapons that Taiwan’s deputy defense minister claimed would allow the island to inflict massive destruction on any invading Chinese force.167

The United States, however domestically polarized, still possesses formidable reserves of military might. Smaller or militarily weaker states that have competing claims with China, instead of falling meekly into line, are becoming emboldened to seek support from other powers and international institutions and in some cases to boost their own military spending. Even


China’s often pliant economic clients are joining in calls for reparations from their patron for the damage wrought by the coronavirus, while China will find itself forced to write off many of the loans made under the BRI scheme, with poor prospects that it will in return be able to extract control of the recipients’ resources or infrastructural assets. Facing an internal economic slowdown and rising domestic unemployment, China also needs to address these problems, even as funds available for the purpose become tighter.

The now (in?)famous concept Allison ascribed to Thucydides, that a rising power and a declining hegemonic one run a very high risk of coming into conflict, may well be an ahistorical axiom, at best applicable only in limited specific cases. Its intellectual currency and repeated invocation by Chinese and American policymakers—usually affirming their determination to avoid falling into the trap—may even have helped to make it a self-fulfilling prophesy, just because the idea of its inevitability became so familiar. From 2005 on, the idea of a bipolar “G-2” or “Chimerica” world, one in which China and the United States shared global hegemony and worked closely together to resolve international problems, had already been publicized extensively by the economist Fred Bergsten, former U.S. national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, the historian Niall Ferguson, and former World Bank head Robert Zoellick. This dualistic perspective tended to encourage thinking and a prevailing intellectual discourse that framed the world in terms of bipolar conflict or collaboration between these two powers, with all others far subordinate and secondary. Arguably, today’s international system is in reality becoming steadily more multipolar.

The experience and memories of the second half of the twentieth century have also been influential in setting this bipolar framework. Over four decades ago, Allison’s Harvard colleague, the late Ernest R. May, published a study demonstrating how, during the Cold War, American decision-makers often cited “lessons” drawn from their own past experiences, notably the belief that during the 1930s the concessions the Western democracies made to Adolf Hitler at Munich in 1938 whetted his ambitions for more and so precipitated the Second World War with Germany. This mindset predisposed them to view their disputes with the Soviet Union during the late 1940s as further encounters with another remorselessly expansionist adversary, which called for a firm, uncompromising, and non-conciliatory response. The fact that the Cold War in which the United States and the Soviet Union were the major protagonists was the last great global rivalry predisposes many present commentators to perceive today’s Sino-American competition as Version 2.0. Yet in many ways, today’s situation seems closer to the rise of newly unified Germany in the late nineteenth century, a major and ambitious new state with ambitions that destabilized an existing multipolar balance of power. The analogy is by no means comforting, given that historians have blamed the outbreak of both the First and Second World Wars upon the absence within Europe of sufficient counterweights to Germany’s economic and military predominance.

If the concept of the Thucydides trap is deeply questionable, the precepts and admonitory warnings that Kirshner draws from Thucydides’s history—the destabilizing impact of unforeseen events, the dangers stemming from hubris, the risks inherent in imprudent demagogic leadership, and the potential for conflict arising from incompatible political systems—are


all ominously relevant to the state of Sino-U.S. relations today. China and the United States alike have fallen into all four of these traps. Xi Jinping likes to refer to “black swans,” unique and hugely significant events or developments that function as massive game-changers but could not reasonably have been anticipated. With global cases already surpassing 50 million, acknowledged deaths topping 1.250,000, and numbers rapidly rising in late autumn 2020, Covid-19 is perhaps better described as a brutally destructive, predatory black pterodactyl. In all fairness, while a pandemic was always on the cards, just how, when, and where any such modern-day plague would arise and develop was impossible to foretell. But policymakers on both sides of the Pacific would have done well to read, learn, and digest the other three lessons of the Athenian general.

A recent study of the foreign policies of the administration of George H. W. Bush gave great credit to the forty-first U.S. president for handling the potentially volatile ending of the Cold War in Europe, especially the years from 1989 to 1991, when Soviet control of Eastern Europe ended and the Soviet Union itself broke up, with prudence and caution, making no rash moves or interventions, allowing events to develop gradually rather than pushing too hard, and eschewing triumphalist rhetoric. It also awarded Bush high marks for his determination, following China’s violent suppression of protests in Beijing and elsewhere across the country in June 1989, to ensure that lines of communication with Deng Xiaoping—chairman of the Central Military Commission and therefore China’s de facto commander-in-chief—and other Chinese leaders remained open and to keep U.S. and international condemnation and ostracism of China within bounds. Bush’s measured and considered response presents a huge contrast to the hyperbole, adventurism, demagoguery, and bombastic, ideologically driven rhetoric now rife in the United States and China alike. In foreign affairs, moreover, Bush was not a self-serving opportunist. In addition, as second director of the U.S. Liaison Office in Beijing from 1974 to 1975, Bush had spent over a year in China’s capital and was personally invested in the relationship. He was willing to pay the price, in terms of political heat and credibility, of ensuring that backchannels for dialogue between China and the United States remained open.

Probably the most fundamental factor in the current situation is that, after the economy contracted by 6.8 percent in the first quarter of 2020, despite an unexpectedly strong recovery in the third quarter of 2020, China’s economic growth rate is at best expected to be around 2 percent for the year as a whole. While many countries around the world would currently envy the Chinese economy’s relatively speedy recovery and resilience, this still represents a major shortfall from the 6 percent anticipated before the pandemic. In the short-term, the existing authorities seem to have benefited from what appears to be the effectiveness of their initial draconian response to the virus. Falling growth rates nonetheless mean that the underlying social contract between the Chinese government and people, that the CCP derives its legitimacy from its ability to maintain economic prosperity and deliver steady expansion, might be in some jeopardy. While it remains impossible to predict exactly how severe the impact of current disruptions to global supply chains and a rising tide of international protectionism, possibly intensified by anti-Chinese sentiment, will be, the damage is likely to be significant. Xi Jinping and other leading officials, while claiming that China had met most of its goals for 2020 and hailing their country’s success in rapidly suppressing Covid-19 and restoring economic growth, responded with calls for greater Chinese economic self-reliance, financial innovation, and the cultivation of the domestic market as opposed to the export sector. More skeptical analysts discerned significant structural impediments and limitations to this strategy, and also questioned the accuracy of some of the figures and data provided by the Chinese authorities. With many Chinese experiencing spells of

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unemployment, short-time work, or reduced profits due to the virus, and retail sales falling by 7.2 percent in the first three quarters of 2020, underlying consumer confidence might well prove difficult to restore.  

In online comments swiftly censored from the internet, in summer 2020 one influential retired Chinese official, He Keng, past deputy director of the Financial and Economic Affairs Committee, went so far as to argue that, with 1.1 billion Chinese not yet in the middle class and 600 million with a monthly income of 1,000 yuan (US$130) or less, in reality China had failed to attain its stated goal of becoming a “comprehensively well-off society” by 2020. This was one of the key milestones set by Xi Jinping in 2012. Before they disappeared, He’s posts, which also criticized how much of China’s wealth was taken by the state and how little went to the people, and called for further economic reform, won widespread endorsement from other netizens.  

As China seeks to become more economically self-reliant and encourage domestic consumption, the fact that only 300 million Chinese qualify for even the lower end of the middle class may limit this policy’s effectiveness. Economists strongly suspect that official Chinese figures understate real unemployment numbers, perhaps by as many as 50 million, though available data is so opaque that all estimates are open to question. Already, moreover, the wages and salaries of many Chinese employees have been cut, with some middle-class families forced to draw on their savings to survive. The 2020 crop of 8.47 million university graduates are concerned that they may not be able to find jobs. Prudent Chinese consumers may well abjure lavish spending and decide to keep their nest-eggs safely in reserve.

Until recently, the majority of Chinese believed that overall, their lives were improving rather than deteriorating and in consequence largely thought well of their government. A long-term set of eight surveys conducted by researchers from the Ash Center of Harvard University over the period 2003 to 2016 discovered that Chinese citizens’ broad level of satisfaction had risen over time, findings confirmed by a second set of inquiries carried out by World Value Survey from 1995 to 2018. Most people expected their lives to continue improving. The Harvard study discerned little sign of “burgeoning discontent among China’s main demographic groups, casting doubt on the idea that the country was facing a crisis of political legitimacy.” It also noted, however, that the higher the educational level of respondents, the greater the degree of skepticism.


they expressed toward the central government and its policies. In addition, people’s attitudes seemed to reflect “real changes in their material well-being” and might shift should their economic circumstances deteriorate.177

According to Reuters, by April 2020, Chinese officials were already aware that they were likely to face a hostile international environment, encountering a backlash from other powers which were deeply resentful of the ravages the coronavirus had inflicted upon them, and which would probably impel resistance from recipients to existing and planned BRI projects. The United States was expected to boost its military and financial aid to allies in Asia and work with other powers to oppose China.178 Even before the pandemic, China was relying on investment from the private sector and other countries to provide a significant part of necessary BRI funding.179 Within China, the BRI enjoyed support among elites but—as was often true of overseas aid programs in the United States during the Cold War—was rather unpopular with the general public, who believed their country was being overly generous to foreign nations while stinting on social welfare measures that would benefit their own citizens. Rightly or wrongly, some critics also accused BRI investments of being vehicles for extensive corruption that benefited well-connected Chinese businesses and cadres.180

With domestic economic problems intensifying, such support as exists for ambitious BRI programs may well dwindle. As mentioned above, in all probability China will be forced to write off a great deal of the funding committed to the enterprises involved. Extensive debt cancellation was likely to enhance the bad press for the BRI within China and increase pressures for the government to focus upon meeting the immediate needs of ordinary Chinese people. As Xiaoyu Pu pointed out in his chapter of the anthology reviewed here, an assertive foreign policy is costly, a luxury that, despite Xi Jinping’s assiduous promotion of nationalism and his incessant proclamation of the need to revitalize the nation by restoring the past glories of the Tianxia tributary system, many Chinese may feel they cannot afford if the price-tag includes cutting funding for domestic social programs.

Such sentiments may intensify if, as has recently been suggested, China is experiencing shortfalls in supplies of staple foodstuffs. With much of the world currently facing basic food shortages, a near-crisis situation that the Covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated, China has already launched a campaign to encourage its people to be thrifty with food. Beijing possesses carefully hoarded reserves of wheat and other necessities, the result of years of stockpiling, but even so, prices of many foodstuffs are rising, with the poor and migrant workers worst affected. Should shortages intensify, Chinese officials may have to reorder their priorities, unless they wish to face the unpalatable prospect of coping with grassroots domestic political unrest.181 Aggressive Chinese sanctions against such major food producers as Australia, Canada, New

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Zealand, and the United States may also prove self-defeating, especially if, as the United Nations asserts, the world is facing a devastating global food crisis, with perhaps 265 million people on the brink of starvation.\(^\text{182}\)

Arguably, China might be well advised to focus upon further improvement of basic aspects of life. Prestigious showcase advanced projects, such as spectacular and environmentally sensitive smart buildings by big-name modern architects or ultramodern airports and high-speed rail systems, coexist with massive deficits at more fundamental levels. When eating in a restaurant in mainland China, young people automatically use the tea or hot water provided at every table to sterilize their chopsticks and crockery. A country where there is so little trust in basic hygienic standards may face difficulties convincing observers that it is a genuine global leader. It is perhaps emblematic of China’s existing problems that the general public believe that infant milk formula produced domestically is so liable to contamination that Chinese shoppers visiting Hong Kong or Macao flock to local stores to buy up—sometimes for lucrative resale across the border—multiple cans of milk powder. For years, many stores in these cities have imposed quotas on the number of cans individual shoppers can purchase, and these precious items are kept under lock and key in special display cabinets. In Hong Kong, the voracious appetite of mainland shoppers for reliable products whose quality they can trust has led hostile locals to label them “locusts.”\(^\text{183}\) It is with good reason that, despite all its much-touted advanced technology and high-profile accomplishments, China still demands to be treated as a developing country.

At present, support within China for assertively nationalist policies appears high. Whether Chinese would be willing to make great sacrifices on behalf of their country’s international ambitions is, however, something of a moot question. The 20 percent of China’s population who have attained a middle-class living standard may not respond enthusiastically to the prospect. One wonders indeed whether Chinese officials could even implement successfully some measures they have threatened, such as sending no more Chinese students to universities in Australia or other countries that may fall foul of the PRC government. Are Chinese parents who are heavily invested in obtaining the best education for their children and can afford it likely to pay any heed to party decrees instructing them to enroll their children instead in mainland universities? From top CCP leaders down, many deliberately send their offspring to study abroad, not least because this may enable them to obtain permanent foreign residency rights, and also because they believe that programs at international universities are far superior to most within China. This is scarcely a vote of confidence in their own country’s “national rejuvenation,” present or prospective.

Signs exist that a great unravelling of China’s intended strategy of almost effortlessly using economic might to win regional hegemony and global predominance is under way. Much of it depended upon sleight of hand, smoke and mirrors, and the ability to convince outsiders that China had already won, making resistance useless. Fearful that doing so might cause more problems than it solved, China has shown marked reluctance to use direct military force either in Hong Kong or against Taiwan. There and elsewhere, the objective has been to put on a show of overwhelming military superiority that will persuade the opposition to fold. This is actually continuing the pattern established by Mao Zedong, who deliberately provoked international crises but after 1953 never pushed military clashes beyond the point of no return. Deng Xiaoping continued this tradition, briefly invading Vietnam in February-March 1979, but then declaring a victory and getting his troops out. China’s increasingly impressive military forces are intended to convey such an aura of invincibility that any opponent will be overawed and concede without fighting. China’s targets are not cooperating.

Here, too, lessons from Thucydides may be in order. Commentators, including Feng Liu in the volume reviewed here, have pointed out that China resembles not maritime, democratic Athens but Sparta, a land power with a highly trained and effective army. What also needs remembering is that the Spartans were generally reluctant to go to war and tried to keep


\(^{183}\) “Anger at Mainland Visitors Escalates With ‘Locust’ Ad,” South China Morning Post, 1 February 2012, [https://www.scmp.com/article/991355/anger-mainland-visitors-escalates-locust-ad](https://www.scmp.com/article/991355/anger-mainland-visitors-escalates-locust-ad); Amie Tsang, “Hong Kong Anger at Chinese ‘Locust’ Shoppers Intensifies,” Financial Times, 16 February 2015, [https://www.ft.com/content/895bc3de-b5a5-11e4-b58d-00144feab7de](https://www.ft.com/content/895bc3de-b5a5-11e4-b58d-00144feab7de).
their campaigns brief and decisive. While Sparta possessed a dominant warrior class who held power within the state, Sparta’s largely agricultural economy depended on the labor of the helots, a class of agricultural workers without political rights who cultivated the land and carried out other menial tasks. For Spartans, the greatest fear was not necessarily external threats but the potential for a helot uprising, a rebellion that might be prompted by any protracted absence of most of Sparta’s soldiers thanks to involvement in a lengthy war. Today, China’s government has invested massive state resources in constructing a network of surveillance, control, and censorship designed to preclude unrest or other challenges to the regime. Sedulous official efforts to inculcate patriotism and nationalist fervor notwithstanding, it is far from guaranteed that this apparatus would prove reliable in suppressing popular dissent during a long-running external conflict. Unsuccessful or drawn-out wars have a history of bringing down those who started them.

At present, over-confidence and hubris seem to be much in evidence in China’s policies. As the seventieth anniversary of Chinese intervention in the Korean War approached, Xi Jinping proclaimed in October 2020 that, while China did not seek war with the United States, it would fight if necessary. He also called for the speeding up of his country’s military modernization, to ensure that China had world-class military forces. In what was designed as a jab at the United States, Xi proclaimed: “In today’s world, any unilateralism, protectionism, and ideology of extreme self-interest are totally unworkable, and any blackmailing, blockades and extreme pressure are totally unworkable. Any actions that focus only on oneself and any efforts to engage in hegemony and bullying will simply not work—not only will it not work, but it will be a dead end.” Skeptical critics suggested that the analogy with the situation during the Korean War was dated and inappropriate, and that the main result of Xi’s speech would be to inflict further damage on China’s relations with the United States. Colin Koh Swee Lean of Singapore’s Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies warned: “The invocation of a Korean war analogy could serve to reinforce Trump’s ‘Red China’ narrative and help to perpetuate a cold war mentality that Beijing has been telling Washington to abandon.” Chen Daoyin, an independent scholar in Shanghai, slyly suggested that, although China was “facing lots of potential conflict areas, . . . these days it is as confident as Germany was before the first world war, or Japan in 1941.” Perhaps wisely, he forbore to add that on both occasions, after rather foolishly taking on the United States, Germany and Japan were crushingly defeated.

As both U.S. presidential candidates strongly condemned Chinese policies in their final debate, with Biden promising that he would make China “play by the international rules” and Trump holding China responsible for the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences, commentators worried that Xi’s rhetoric had the potential to “backfire” and spark accidental military confrontations in the Taiwan Strait or South China Sea. Prof. Steve Tsang of SOAS in London was apprehensive that his tough talk would influence “air force pilots who may also get more aggressive in chance encounters with their US counterparts, and the risk of incident increases as Xi and the Party Central takes on a more clearly anti-USA tone in indoctrinating Chinese officers.” A Chinese academic glumly concluded: “The future is not hopeful, since whoever it is that takes the presidency, they will not be polite to China.” This prediction seemed likely to be correct. Speaking to the Heritage Foundation a few days earlier, U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper described how by 2021, 50 percent of the curriculum of the Pentagon’s National Defense University would focus upon China. Esper warned that: “Our strategic competitors China and Russia are attempting to erode our hard-earned gains, as they undermine international rules and
norms and use coercion against other nations for their own benefit.” A few days later, Esper expounded further to the Atlantic Council that the United States would work closely with its existing allies and other partners to combat these threats.

It is not impossible that what appears to be Xi Jinping’s response of doubling down on a strategy of “Full speed ahead and damn the torpedoes” may succeed in fulfilling his grandiose designs. A recent report by the Lowy Institute, an Australian think tank, suggested that the dismal and disorganized response of the United States to the Covid-19 pandemic had “sharpened the contrasts—and narrowed the power differential—between the United States and China.” Anticipating that, whereas the Chinese economy would actually grow in 2020, it would take the United States until 2024 and Japan until 2027 to return to 2019 levels of economic activity, Hervé Lemahieu, director of the Institute’s Asian Power and Diplomacy Programme, expected the pandemic to accelerate the decline of both countries relative to China. This might, therefore, seem a uniquely propitious moment for China to pursue its regional and global ambitions.

But rather than embodying the divide-and-rule tactics recommended by Sunzi, the policies of Xi Jinping—and the actions of some of China’s diplomatic representatives who see themselves as his surrogates—seem to be bringing together a coalition of states and even non-governmental organizations that are seeking allies to join them in checking the further extension of mainland China’s power. Chinese officials today may still remember and in some cases even look back somewhat nostalgically to the Cultural Revolution, but in reality, they have little experience of dealing with major adversity either at home or abroad. Indeed, the behavior of the self-styled wolf warriors, as they officiously interfere in peaceful demonstrations in Western countries and attempt to police and censor the activities of Chinese and non-Chinese alike in their host nations, is uncomfortably reminiscent of the antics of the extremist staff of Chinese overseas missions during the Cultural Revolution, as they ran riot and threw their weight about in the countries to which they were assigned. When they made themselves too much of a nuisance, many were unceremoniously shipped home. Even if such drastic responses may be a step too far for most states today, these officious and often unprepossessing ideologues, shrilly peddling a formulaic party line that often sounds like a cracked record, have been outstandingly successful in turning foreigners against China.

By October 2020, in terms of prompting China’s opponents to make common cause, the wolf warriors were indeed managing to surpass themselves. On 8 October 2020, two Chinese diplomats turned up uninvited at a national day reception hosted by the Taiwan trade mission at a hotel in Suva, Fiji’s capital, seeking to photograph guests; the ensuing scuffle left one Taiwan official in hospital. Severe warnings by Chinese diplomats in New Delhi that Indians should

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refrain from celebrating Taiwan’s national day and requests that journalists not refer to Taiwan as a country or Tsai Ing-wen as its president proved spectacularly counter-productive, prompting highly publicized congratulations and gestures of support from leading Indian politicians, internet users, and the media. Both major Taiwan political parties sent thanks in return.\footnote{Sarah Zheng, “China Warns Indian Media not to Call Taiwan a Country. Internet Reacts by Calling it a Country,” \textit{South China Morning Post}, 12 October 2020, \url{https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3105164/china-warns-indian-media-not-call-taiwan-country-internet}.}

Simultaneously, credible reports circulated that for several months Chinese officials had threatened to arrest American citizens in China if the United States proceeded to prosecute for visa fraud a number of Chinese students and scholars arrested by the U.S. authorities in summer 2020, on charges that they had failed to declare their affiliations with the Chinese military. Hu Xijin, chief editor of the \textit{Global Times}, wrote openly on Twitter that the detentions of these individuals was “not good” for the “safety of some US nationals in China.” He added: “Does Washington need to be warned? It’s common sense. In my view, hegemony has turned some US elites stupid, or they’re pretending to be stupid.” The Department of State, which had already in September issued a travel advisory warning Americans to “reconsider” any plans to visit Hong Kong or China, due to the “arbitrary enforcement of local laws,” declined any further comment. Less diplomatically, the head of the U. S. Justice Department’s national security division warned: ““If China wants to be seen as one of the world’s leading nations, it should respect the rule of law and stop taking hostages.”\footnote{Edward Wong, “China Threatens to Detain Americans if U.S. Prosecutes Chinese Scholars,” \textit{New York Times}, 18 October 2020, \url{https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/18/us/politics/china-us-threats-detain.html}; Kate O’Keefe and Aruna Viswanatha, “China Warns U.S. It May Detain Americans in Response to Prosecutions of Chinese Scholars,” \textit{Wall Street Journal}, 17 October 2020, \url{https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-warns-u-s-it-may-detain-americans-in-response-to-prosecutions-of-chinese-scholars-11602960959}.}

Comparable problems arose the same week in relations between China and Canada, which had been icy since December 2018, when at the request of the United States, which sought her extradition on charges of breaking international sanctions on Iran, the Canadian immigration authorities detained Meng Wanzhou, chief financial officer of the Chinese technology firm Huawei and daughter of the business’s founder, at Vancouver airport. In retaliation, China arrested two Canadians—Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor—on charges of espionage, holding them in Spartan conditions that contrasted harshly with the luxurious Vancouver mansions where Meng remained in comfort on bail while pursuing lengthy legal appeals against U.S. extradition demands. The widely publicized plight of the “two Michaels” sparked public anger across Canada, with China accused of hostage-taking, and their detention even brought up at a United Nations Security Council meeting in October 2020.\footnote{Associated Press, “China Urged to Release Canadian Michael Kovrig at UN Security Council Meeting,” \textit{South China Morning Post}, 21 October 2020, \url{https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3106432/think-tank-urges-china-release-canadian-employee-michael}.}

In provincial election campaigns held in British Columbia in autumn 2020, the issue of unwarranted mainland Chinese political interference in Canada gained new prominence, with demands from voters that candidates refuse funding for projects offered by China under the Belt and Road Initiative and condemn Chinese policies on human rights, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang.\footnote{Ian Young, “Hong Kong Campaigners Want China on British Columbia’s Election Agenda, Branding Some Candidates ‘CCP Leaning’,” \textit{South China Morning Post}, 15 October 2020, \url{https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3105575/hong-kong-campaigners-want-china-british-columbias-election}.}
It might have seemed that Canadian-Chinese relations had already reached rock bottom. But they still had lower depths to plum. In mid-October, Cong Peiwu, China’s ambassador to Canada, condemned his host country’s decision to grant refugee status to Hong Kong protesters fleeing the city, characterizing them as “violent criminals.” Cong warned that, unless Canada changed its policies, “the good health and safety” of the 300,000 Canadian citizens living in Hong Kong might be in jeopardy, prompting prime minister Justin Trudeau to harden his stance on China and condemn China’s “coercive diplomacy” while affirming Canada’s commitment to defending human rights and the conditions of Canadians everywhere in the world. Canada’s foreign minister called Cong in to reprimand him. Even so, influential Canadians complained that their government had been too conciliatory. David Mulroney, a former Canadian ambassador to China, recommended that “the government should put the ambassador in the diplomatic deep freeze, cutting off his high-level access and warning him that any more menacing comments will result in expulsion.” Another diplomat, Charles Burton, who had served as counsel in the Canadian embassy in Beijing, commented: “If any other ambassador for any other nation had made a statement implying threats to Canadian citizens, then that ambassador would be declared persona non grata and out within 48 hours.” Approving a motion introduced by a Hong Kong-born member of parliament, Canada’s cross-party parliamentary standing committee on citizenship and immigration unanimously demanded that the government introduce formal legislation offering Hongkongers who wished to leave their city a safe haven.

The roster of foreign countries that were targets for Chinese rebukes and threats was steadily expanding. In October 2020, on the advice of its military and security services, Sweden banned companies using equipment provided by the Chinese firms Huawei and ZTE from taking part in a forthcoming 5G spectrum auction. Expressing his country’s “strong dissatisfaction” with Sweden, Zhao Lijian, spokesman for China’s Foreign Ministry, warned that Sweden should “correct its wrong decision, to avoid bringing a negative impact to China-Sweden economic and trade cooperation and the operations of Swedish enterprises in China.”

By late October, Chinese diplomats had apparently thrown all caution to the winds. They did so in a crisis situation that is far worse than that China faced after 4 June 1989. Shocking as events on that occasion may have been, they involved Chinese killing other Chinese, which might be considered a domestic matter and was, in any case, far from unprecedented in the bloody history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century China. Covid-19 is killing hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, around the world, with no realistic end to its ravages yet in sight. The 1960s, when China was at odds not just with numerous non-communist states but also with a sizeable portion of the communist bloc, is perhaps the last period when China managed to alienate more countries than at present. Not to mention a broad swathe of non-governmental organizations, many of them with appreciable international influence.

China’s opponents have already shown considerable ingenuity and imagination in devising tactics to discredit its policies and embarrass and inconvenience those implementing them. In the later twentieth century, economic sanctions against South Africa were complemented by campaigns to force universities, pension funds, and other institutions to divest themselves of assets they had invested in businesses in that country. South African-based firms were blacklisted, and sports teams banned from international events. Even more ominously for China, human rights activists lodged charges of genocide in the International Court of Justice against top officials of governments accused of such crimes. The most high-profile such case was that of former Chilean dictator August Pinochet, who was arrested in London in August 1998 on charges of human

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rights abuses. These precedents are by no means forgotten. It seems near inevitable that in the foreseeable future enterprising Chinese and Uighur activists will lodge such charges against Xi Jinping and his followers and perhaps even launch crusades to block investments in or from China.

Such ventures are likely to attract high-level political support within the United States and other western countries. Indeed, on 27 October 2020, with the U.S. election campaign at its height, leading Republican and Democratic senators cooperated in introducing a resolution declaring that China’s campaign “against Uighurs, ethnic Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and members of other Muslim minority groups in the Xinjiang Uighur autonomous region constitutes genocide.”\(^{199}\) Calls to cancel the February 2022 Winter Olympics, scheduled to be hosted by China in Beijing, were likewise mounting. In September 2020, 160 human rights groups urged the International Olympics Committee to move the event elsewhere, in response to China’s actions in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. Speaking to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee in early October, British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab was willing to entertain the possibility of a British boycott of the games.\(^{200}\) Hong Kong protest supporters were proving themselves resourceful and inventive in exploring avenues to address their concerns and grievances. By summer 2020, activists based in the United Kingdom were preparing to use the British courts to bring private prosecutions for torture against expatriate British police officers involved in the suppression of the recent protests in Hong Kong. Within weeks, the venture attracted crowd-funding of at least £200,000.\(^{201}\) Heavy-handed Chinese efforts to prevent critics pursuing their complaints outside its borders were having little positive impact; instead, attempts to silence and intimidate opponents often rebounded upon China.

As of early November 2020, Trump’s political longevity appeared increasingly problematic, whereas Xi Jinping was apparently well entrenched, his authority predominant within China’s communist system, and seemingly assured of remaining president for life should he so desire. The Chinese-born American scholar Prof. Minxin Pei nonetheless suggests that the system that has developed under Xi’s leadership is plagued by “brittleness and insecurity” derived from his regime’s “high degree of ideological rigidity, punitive policies toward ethnic minorities and political dissenters at home, and an impulsive foreign policy.” Sustained economic pressure and strategic competition from the United States and its allies might well, Pei argues, bring a “prolonged period of mediocre economic performance” that would significantly erode popular support for the CCP while starving the party’s “patronage structure” of the resources required to maintain support from its cadres and apparatchiks. Fresh unrest would be likely to erupt in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong. Ultimately, facing “economic stagnation and rising social unrest at home and great-power competition abroad,” the party’s hold on power would be in jeopardy.\(^{202}\) Pei’s analysis is of course by no means unchallenged: other commentators, such as the authors of the recent Rand and Lowy reports, are less convinced that China’s economic problems are or will become so severe as to threaten the regime’s viability.

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\(^{202}\) Minxin Pei, “China’s Coming Upheaval,” *Foreign Affairs* 99:3 (May/June 2020): 82-95, quotations from 82, 84, 86, 88, 92.
Beleaguered leaders who feel their personal hold on power slipping have been known to resort to war as a means of restoring their political fortunes. As Thucydides demonstrates, accepted standards of civilization can be fragile, and leaders who feel threatened sometimes abandon rationality and prudence. Whatever the differences in their circumstances, neither Trump nor Xi has reason to feel particularly secure in his position. Each is wedded to an anachronistic, backward-looking worldview that assumes that his own country must be globally predominant and puts its interests first. Each man is highly transactional in his outlook, viewing international affairs as a zero-sum game. Both leaders are demagogues with a fondness for vainglorious rhetoric. Trump and Xi are alike in being thin-skinned and self-advertising, deliberately encouraging a massive personality cult centered on themselves. They enjoy grandiloquent pomp and circumstance. Both demand total loyalty and wreak ferocious retribution on those they believe have betrayed them. Each has autocratic tendencies and little respect for established traditions, mores, or customary checks and balances. And until the end of 2019, both politicians thought themselves to be powering ahead on cruise control—possibly with a helpful assist from the other—to fulfill their greatest ambitions in the near future.

Would either man, bent on shoring up a sagging position and ensuring his own political survival, or perhaps set on taking Samson-like revenge for his imminent downfall and getting his aggravation in first, deliberately provoke an international crisis with the potential to escalate into a wider confrontation? Would their military and civilian advisers support or block the eruption of any such conflict? The experience of the Cold War, when most big powers generally exercised restraint and sought to avoid expanding small clashes into major conflagrations, suggests that in practice, caution was more often than not the order of the day. With speculation rife that a new Cold War has begun, one must hope this remains the case. For Thucydides ominously warns his readers how easily self-interested and shortsighted leaders, overcome by hubris, can conjure up disaster for their own countries and far beyond.

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