

The Chinese View of Strategic Competition with the United States

On November 29, 2012, two weeks after his appointment as the new general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping, along with the rest of the all-powerful seven-member Standing Committee of the Politburo, visited the vast National Museum of China in Tiananmen Square. Cloaked in the dark suits of the party elite, the seven men toured an exhibition titled “The Road to Rejuvenation,” about China’s history from the Opium War to the present day. It was there that China’s new leader revealed his—and by extension, the Communist Party’s—profoundly tortured views on the United States.

As he stood at the threshold of an exhibition that offered not a single word of praise for any of the countless Western businessmen, scientists, soldiers, philosophers, diplomats, missionaries and educators who had helped China modernize from the 19th to the 21st centuries, Xi declared that the “Chinese dream” constituted a “great revival of the Chinese nation.” That the president of China and the head of its Communist Party would frame his goals for his country in quintessentially American terms, a dream, at the doorstep to a deeply xenophobic museum exhibition illustrates the messy complexity of China’s response to and its view of its strategic competition with the United States.

China's power has measurably increased. It now boasts the second highest gross domestic product of any nation in the world. Its navy is capable of carrying out complex evacuation operations as far away at Northern Africa. But if anything, since the rise of CCP boss Xi Jinping in 2012, the Communist Party has acted as though the threat posed by the United States is intensifying. Across a vast array of fields, including ideology, diplomacy, standards-setting in the technological realm, the military, and the media, China is engaged in a full-scale strategic competition with the United States. Chinese thinkers like to accuse Westerners, and particularly Americans, of "Cold War" thinking. But years before a large percentage of Americans began to worry about the strategic challenge presented by China, China's government had already entered a new Cold War with the United States.

China's government views its strategic competition with the United States as rooted in a battle between two ideologies—China's version of Leninism versus Western liberalism. China has been opportunistic in fighting this battle. China's aggressiveness increased considerably following the global recession of 2008 when China saw the United States as a wobbly power. By February 2010, even Europeans were wondering how to respond to China's "strident rise."¹ Similarly, during today's fight against COVID-19, China has sought to contrast

¹ <https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/bulletin-article/2010/how-should-europe-respond-chinas-strident-rise>

what it views as American failures to fight the disease with what China claims to be its successful suppression of the pandemic.

Starting in 2008, and accelerating since 2012 when Xi Jinping took office, China has launched a battle against Western ideology both inside and outside of China. As with many of China's ideological wars, its main battlefield was domestic. In April 2013, the General Office of the Chinese Communist Party issued a communique ordering heightened vigilance against American ideas. The communique, called Document Number 9, listed seven political "perils." Among them were the growth of civil society, criticism of the party's mistakes, the promotion of "universal values," a free press, and a privatized economy. The document described China's ideological situation as "a complicated, intense struggle" and framed the purveyors of these "false ideological trends" as enemies. Again, the party—as it has done in the past—declared war on American ideas.

In the fall of 2014, Document Number 9 was followed by Document Number 30, which ordered universities cleansed of Western-inspired liberal ideas. Party secretaries of universities were summoned to Beijing to study the document and directed, the state-run press reported, to "enhance their sense of danger and resolutely safeguard political security and ideological security." In November 2014, the Liaoning Daily, a party newspaper in northeast China, drew nationwide attention when it declared that ideological laxity was rampant in Chinese

universities. Chinese academics, the newspaper complained, were comparing Chairman Mao to an emperor, praising Western notions such as the separation of powers, and advocating “that China should take the path of the West.”

The party under Xi has come up with all sorts of slogans to take this ideological battle with Western ideas to the international arena. In March 2014 in Germany and then again at the Sixth BRICS summit in July of that year, Xi floated the idea of “the China solution” to the problems of the world, which involved adopting a combination of China’s authoritarian political system and China’s mercantilist economy. Almost simultaneously, in 2013, Xi proposed the idea of an “Asian-Pacific Community of Common Destiny.” Two years later, this vision had expanded to “A Community of Common Destiny for Mankind,” which he outlined to the United Nations General Assembly.

As the analyst David Kelly has noted, the China Solution and the Community of Common Destiny are part of a shift from Deng Xiaoping’s doctrine of “hiding and biding” to one that involves stepping in where the US steps back. It stresses China’s role in shaping international organizations and initiatives, insisting on China’s “right to be heard” in global affairs.²

² <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/china-solution-beijing-responds-trump>

China has invested billions of dollars in building this “right to be heard” across the world, creating a massive organization called “Voice of China” which incorporates the international-facing wings of China Global Television, the Xinhua News Agency, China Radio International and the China Daily, among other publications. The Xinhua News Agency is now the largest wire service in the world in terms of bureaus and correspondents. China’s government also subsidizes Chinese-language media outlets around the world and has been particularly aggressive in the United States, Australia and Canada. China seeks the ability to continue to dispatch as many reporters to the United States as it sees fit while limiting access to China by American correspondents and the websites of Western media outlets.

Much of the work on media was taken over by the United Front bureaucracy of the Chinese Communist Party during a significant reorganization in 2018. Xi Jinping has promoted the work of that key bureaucracy. As he said in a 2015 speech, “the United Front ... is an important magic weapon for strengthening the party’s ruling position ... and an important magic weapon for realizing the China Dream of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation.” China has viewed social media as a key component of this ideological battle with America. On June 11, 2020, Twitter announced that it had deleted more than 170,000 accounts tied to a Chinese state-linked operation that were spreading

deceptive information around the COVID-19 virus, political dynamics in Hong Kong, and other issues.³

China views its campaign to reunite with Taiwan and the years-long demonstrations in Hong Kong as critical aspects of its strategic competition with the United States. Numerous Chinese officials have blamed “hostile foreign forces,” the CIA, and “Western black hands” for the unrest in Hong Kong. The recent move by China’s National People’s Congress to approve a resolution to introduce sweeping security legislation for Hong Kong is part of China’s campaign to empower its security services to crack down on Hong Kong pro-democracy activists and link them with the United States. China sees political developments in Taiwan as part of its larger strategic struggle with the United States. In January 2020, Taiwan’s president Tsai Ing-wen cruised to re-election. Her victory, according to the Xinhua News Agency, was “a temporary counter-current.” Xinhua also blamed open intervention by “anti-China political forces” for helping Tsai win.⁴

Since Xi’s rise and accelerating over the last two years, China’s diplomats have appeared increasingly eager to attack the United States.

³ <https://thehill.com/policy/cybersecurity/502371-twitter-deletes-over-170000-accounts-tied-to-chinese-propaganda-efforts>

⁴ http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-01/12/c_138697346.htm

China's media has portrayed these diplomats as "wolf warriors," practicing "wolf diplomacy," a reference to a 2015 Chinese action movie. China's diplomats have been eager to capitalize on perceived failures in the United States as a way to highlight what they believe to be the superiority of the Chinese system. Following the slaying of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020, Chinese spokesmen began appropriating Floyd's dying words, "I can't breathe," when asked to respond to US criticism of Chinese moves in Hong Kong and elsewhere.

China views strategic competition with the United States in cyberspace as another important battlefield. China has a radically different perspective on the Internet and cyberspace than the one generally advocated by the US government. At the opening of the World Internet Conference in Wuzhen, Zhejiang Province, in 2015, Xi Jinping delivered a keynote speech and proposed the "China Plan" on jointly building a community of shared destiny in cyberspace.

China has used diplomatic efforts to enshrine and expand the concept of cyber sovereignty in international organizations. As described by Xi, cyber sovereignty means "respecting each country's right to choose its own internet development path, its own internet management

model, and its own public policies on the internet.”⁵ This position is in direct contrast to the American vision that cyberspace should remain an open, global platform. Beijing is also in the process of exporting its philosophy to other nations, assisting authoritarian regimes as they seek to manage the flow of information and tighten surveillance of their people. China has paid particular attention to two sets of technologies—5G and surveillance—and has placed them at the center of its competition not only to win over markets, but to set standards and control the underlying ideology of cyberspace around the world.

It is not clear how successful Beijing is going to be as it seeks to advance across a broad front that spans the South China Sea, the virtual realm, space exploration, the North and South Pole, just to name a few arenas where it has joined in strategic competition against the United States. China’s soft power has taken a significant hit from its woeful handling of the outset of the coronavirus pandemic. While the “wolf diplomacy” being practiced by Chinese representatives overseas might play well in Beijing, it has served to alienate governments, media and the general population across a significant portion of the globe. Chinese analysts have warned, often elliptically, about what one Chinese scholar

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http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1327570.shtml.

called “strategic overdraft.”⁶ However, it would also be a mistake to underestimate China’s ability to rise to the challenge. China’s government has a remarkable ability to surprise its competitors, including those in the United States.

As far as policy proposals, the United States might do well to seek far more reciprocity in its relations with China than before. It also must be willing to let certain parts of the relationship founder should Beijing be unwilling to accept reciprocity. One example would be in media access. If China is unwilling to allow American reporters to work in China, the US government must contemplate asking all Chinese reporters in America to leave. If China continues to block the websites of American media companies in China, the United States should consider closing the operations of Chinese-funded media outlets in the United States.

⁶ <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1162594.shtml>