

China Is Not Ten Feet Tall

How Alarmism Undermines American Strategy

By [Ryan Hass](#)

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China, the story goes, is inexorably rising and on the verge of overtaking a faltering United States. China has become the largest engine of global economic growth, the largest trading nation, and the largest destination for foreign investment. It has locked in major trade and investment deals in Asia and Europe and is using the Belt and Road Initiative—the largest development project of the twenty-first century—to win greater influence in every corner of the world. It is exporting surveillance tools, embedding technology in 5G communications networks, and using cyber-capabilities to both steal sensitive information and shape political discourse overseas. It is converting economic and political weight into military might, using civil-military fusion to develop cutting-edge capabilities and bullying its neighbors, including U.S. allies and partners such as Australia, India, and Taiwan. And at home, it is ruthlessly cracking down everywhere from Hong Kong to Xinjiang, with little concern about criticism from the United States and other democratic governments.

Among the most eager purveyors of this story line are China's government-affiliated media outlets. Projecting self-assurance, they have also gone out of their way to contrast their own achievements with plentiful examples of American dysfunction. They point to images of insurrectionists storming the U.S. Capitol and of American citizens standing in line for water during power outages in Texas as evidence of the decay of "Western democracy." They celebrate China's success in "defeating" COVID-19 and reopening the country, while the United States and other Western countries still struggle to stop the

spread of the virus. “Time and momentum are on our side,” Chinese President Xi Jinping declared in a speech at the Communist Party’s Fifth Plenum last fall. In January, Chen Yixin, a top security official, told a Chinese Communist Party study session, “The rise of the East and decline of the West has become a trend.”

Authoritarian systems excel at showcasing their strengths and concealing their weaknesses. But policymakers in Washington must be able to distinguish between the image Beijing presents and the realities it confronts. China is the second most powerful country in the world and the most formidable competitor the United States has faced in decades. Yet at the same time, and in spite of its many visible defects, the United States remains the stronger power in the U.S.-Chinese relationship—and it has good reason to think it can stay that way. For all the obstacles facing the United States, those facing China are considerably greater.

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During the Cold War, Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger cautioned against “ten-foot-tall syndrome”: the tendency among U.S. policymakers to view their Soviet competitors as towering figures of immense strength and overwhelming intellect. A similar syndrome has taken hold in the United States today, and the harms are not just analytical. Concentrating on China’s strengths without accounting for its vulnerabilities creates anxiety. Anxiety breeds insecurity. Insecurity leads to overreaction, and overreaction produces bad decisions that undermine the United States’ own competitiveness. Seeing China clearly is the first step toward getting China policy right.

THE MISMEASURE OF THE MIDDLE KINGDOM

China poses the most direct test of U.S. foreign policy in decades. Not since the Cold War has a country seriously contested U.S. leadership in multiple regions of the world simultaneously. The combination of military strength, economic weight, and global ambition makes China a different—and more complex—challenge than the Soviet Union presented during the Cold War.

In recent years, Beijing has made plain its revisionist ambitions. It seeks adjustments to the distribution of power in the international system, the security order in Asia, the role and remit of international institutions, the free flow of uncensored information across borders, and the liberal nature of the existing international order. It wants its Leninist political model and state-led economic model to be accepted and respected. It has signaled that it will brook no challenges to its conception of its territorial boundaries or its management of domestic affairs. And it has declared a national goal of becoming the world leader in a growing number of advanced technologies, from artificial intelligence to electric vehicles.

But it is hardly a foregone conclusion that China will travel a linear path toward realizing its goals. For an accurate measure of the challenges China poses to U.S. interests, Beijing's strengths must be evaluated alongside its vulnerabilities. Xi and his advisers face as stiff a set of challenges as almost anyone else in the world.

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Consider China's seemingly unstoppable economic ascent. In reality, the challenges over the medium term are significant. China is at risk of growing old before it grows rich, becoming a graying society with degrading economic fundamentals that impede growth. The working-age population is already shrinking; by 2050, China will go from having eight workers per retiree now to two workers per retiree. Moreover, it has already squeezed out most of the large productivity gains that come with a population becoming more educated and urban and adopting technologies to make manufacturing more efficient. China is running out of productive places to invest in infrastructure, and rising debt levels will further complicate its growth path. In the past decade alone, China's debt has more than doubled, from 141 percent of GDP in 2008 to over 300 percent in 2019. Ballooning debt will make it harder for China to buy its way up the ladder from low-end manufacturing to high value-added production, as South Korea and Taiwan did at similar levels of development.

Meanwhile, the political system is growing increasingly sclerotic as power becomes more concentrated around Xi. Once renowned for technocratic competence, the Chinese Communist Party is becoming better known for Leninist rigidity. Space for local policy experimentation appears to be shrinking, as more decisions become concentrated in Beijing. The top-down nature of the system has also made it more difficult for officials to revisit past decisions or report bad news to the top. This dynamic likely contributed to the slow early response to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan. Although the leadership has made notable gains in alleviating extreme poverty, it also has become increasingly anxious and uncompromising in clamping down on perceived challenges to its authority. Beijing's rigid ethos for imposing its will along the country's peripheral regions, including but not limited to Xinjiang, may bring future problems. Externally,

China faces formidable obstacles to its ambitions. Beijing's repression at home, assertiveness abroad, and efforts to conceal critical initial details surrounding the coronavirus pandemic have contributed to rising negative views toward China.

According to Pew polling from October 2020, unfavorable views of China have reached historic highs across a diverse set of countries. Beijing is also likely to encounter rising budgetary constraints on its massive overseas initiatives in the coming years, as it contends with both a cooling economy and rising demands from an aging society.

From a strategic perspective, China's military likely will remain relatively constrained for the foreseeable future in its ability to project force beyond its immediate periphery, let alone to marry power projection with political and economic influence on a global scale—definitional features of a superpower. China confronts a uniquely challenging geography. It is bordered by 14 countries, four of which are nuclear armed and five of which harbor unresolved territorial disputes with Beijing. These include an aging but wealthy Japan, a rising and nationalistic India, a revanchist Russia, a technologically powerful South Korea, and a dynamic and determined Vietnam. All these countries have national identities that resist subordination to China or its interests. And the United States maintains a constant forward-deployed military presence in the region, supported by basing and access agreements in countries along China's periphery.

China is also vulnerable when it comes to food and energy security. It lacks enough arable land to feed its population and imports roughly half its oil from the Middle East. In a conflict, Chinese naval capacity would be insufficient to prevent China from being cut off from vital supplies. Beijing is working to address this vulnerability, but there are no quick or easy solutions.

THE CASE FOR SELF-CONFIDENCE

Washington's bipartisan move in recent years to a hard-line approach to China has been driven above all by Beijing: Chinese leaders have grown more impatiently aggressive in the pursuit of their ambitions and have increasingly leaned on nationalism, particularly as ideology and economic performance have become diminishing sources of social cohesion. But much of the shift in Washington has also been driven by a growing sense of panic about China's strengths, leading to a bout of American insecurity.

Such panic is unlikely to prove constructive: an alarmed focus on degrading China's strengths risks causing the United States to focus too little on the more essential task of bolstering its own. Any attempt to use the China threat to spur domestic reform or overcome domestic division is likely to do more harm than good. At home, inflating the China threat will encourage the political weaponization of the issue, with China serving as a tool for ambitious politicians to discredit opponents for being weak. Abroad, such an approach will widen divisions with allies and partners, almost none of whom share Washington's view that China is an existential threat. And it is likely to encourage policies that in an effort to harm China, end up doing equal or greater harm to the United States—including by foreclosing coordination with Beijing on issues of vital importance to Americans.

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The Trump administration's trade policies offer a clear demonstration of this dynamic. Tariffs on Chinese imports were sold as a tool to compel Chinese capitulation to U.S.

concerns about unfair trading practices. In fact, they had little success in forcing desired economic changes in China, and they triggered Chinese retaliation that did plenty of harm in the United States: a rising trade deficit, losses to U.S. farmers that resulted in a \$28 billion bailout, and the elimination of an estimated 245,000 jobs.

The United States has good reason to be confident about its ability to compete with China. The U.S. economy is still \$7 trillion larger than China's. The United States enjoys energy and food security, comparatively healthy demographics, the world's finest higher education system, and possession of the world's reserve currency. It benefits from peaceful borders and favorable geography. It boasts an economy that allocates capital efficiently and traditionally serves as a sponge for the brightest thinkers and the best ideas in the world. It has a transparent and predictable legal system and a political system that is designed to spur self-correction. China has none of these attributes.

Self-confidence should foster a steady, patient, and wise response to China's rise—one that can attract broad support at home and abroad. Some elements of this approach will require standing up to Chinese actions that challenge U.S. interests and values even while pushing Beijing to contribute more to efforts to address transnational challenges, such as building a global disease surveillance network and decarbonizing the global economy. At the same time, U.S. policymakers will need to accept that coexistence means accepting competition as a condition to be managed rather than a problem to be solved, as Kurt Campbell and Jake Sullivan (now White House Asia coordinator and national security adviser, respectively) argued in these pages in 2019. Above all, the United States will need to “measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation,” as George Kennan put it early in the Cold War.

The more the United States can restore confidence that it is the country best prepared in the world to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century, the better it will be able to focus attention where it matters most: not on slowing China down but on strengthening itself. To compete effectively with China, Washington will need to focus on bolstering the United States' domestic dynamism, international prestige, and unmatched global network of alliances and partnerships. These are the real keys to the United States' strength, and China cannot take them away.