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China vs. America

Managing the Next Clash of Civilizations

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As Americans awaken to a rising China that now rivals the United States in every arena, many seek comfort in the conviction that as China grows richer and stronger, it will follow in the footsteps of Germany, Japan, and other countries that have undergone profound transformations and emerged as advanced liberal democracies. In this view, the magic cocktail of globalization, market-based consumerism, and integration into the rule-based international order ^[2] will eventually lead China to become democratic at home and to develop into what former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick once described as “a responsible stakeholder” ^[3] abroad.

Samuel Huntington disagreed. In his essay “The Clash of Civilizations?” ^[4], published in this magazine in 1993, the political scientist argued that, far from dissolving in a global liberal world order, cultural fault lines would become a defining feature of the post-Cold War world. Huntington’s argument is remembered today primarily for its prescience in spotlighting the divide between “Western and Islamic civilizations”—a rift that was revealed most vividly by the 9/11 attacks and their aftermath. But Huntington saw the gulf between the U.S.-led West and Chinese civilization as just as deep, enduring, and consequential. As he put it, “The very notion that there could be a ‘universal civilization’ is a Western idea, directly at odds with the particularism of most Asian societies and their emphasis on what distinguishes one people from another.”

The years since have bolstered Huntington’s case. The coming decades will only strengthen it further. The United States embodies what Huntington considered Western civilization. And tensions between American and Chinese values, traditions, and philosophies will aggravate the fundamental structural stresses that occur whenever a rising power, such as China, threatens to displace an established power, such as the United States.

The reason such shifts so often lead to conflict is Thucydides’ trap ^[5], named after the ancient Greek historian who observed a dangerous dynamic between a rising Athens and ruling Sparta. According to Thucydides, “It was the rise of Athens, and the fear that this instilled in Sparta, that made war inevitable.” Rising powers understandably feel a growing sense of entitlement and demand greater influence and respect. Established powers,

faced with challengers, tend to become fearful, insecure, and defensive. In such an environment, misunderstandings are magnified, empathy remains elusive, and events and third-party actions that would otherwise be inconsequential or manageable can trigger wars that the primary players never wanted to fight.

In the case of the United States and China ^[6], Thucydidean risks are compounded by civilizational incompatibility between the two countries, which exacerbates their competition and makes it more difficult to achieve rapprochement. This mismatch is most easily observed in the profound differences between American and Chinese conceptions of the state, economics, the role of individuals, relations among nations, and the nature of time.

Americans see government as a necessary evil and believe that the state's tendency toward tyranny and abuse of power must be feared and constrained. For Chinese, government is a necessary good, the fundamental pillar ensuring order and preventing chaos. In American-style free-market capitalism, government establishes and enforces the rules; state ownership and government intervention in the economy sometimes occur but are undesirable exceptions. In China's state-led market economy, the government establishes targets for growth, picks and subsidizes industries to develop, promotes national champions, and undertakes significant, long-term economic projects to advance the interests of the nation.

Chinese culture does not celebrate American-style individualism, which measures society by how well it protects the rights and fosters the freedom of individuals. Indeed, the Chinese term for "individualism"—*gerenzhuyi*—suggests a selfish preoccupation with oneself over one's community. China's equivalent of "give me liberty or give me death" would be "give me a harmonious community or give me death." For China, order is the highest value, and harmony results from a hierarchy in which participants obey Confucius' first imperative: Know thy place.

This view applies not only to domestic society but also to global affairs, where the Chinese view holds that China's rightful place is atop the pyramid; other states should be arranged as subordinate tributaries. The American view is somewhat different. Since at least the end of World War II, Washington has sought to prevent the emergence of a "peer competitor" that could challenge U.S. military dominance. But postwar American conceptions of international order have also emphasized the need for a rule-based global system that restrains even the United States.

Finally, the Americans and the Chinese think about time and experience its passage differently. Americans tend to focus on the present and often count in hours or days. Chinese, on the other hand, are more historical-minded and often think in terms of decades and even centuries.

Of course, these are sweeping generalizations that are by necessity reductive and not fully reflective of the complexities of American and Chinese society. But they also provide important reminders that policymakers in the United States and China should keep in mind in seeking to manage this competition without war.

WE'RE NUMBER ONE

The cultural differences between the United States and China are aggravated by a remarkable trait shared by both countries: an extreme superiority complex. Each sees itself as exceptional ^[7]—indeed, without peer. But there can be only one number one. Lee Kuan Yew, the former prime minister of Singapore, had doubts about the United States' ability to adapt to a rising China. "For America to be displaced, not in the world, but only in the western Pacific, by an Asian people long despised and dismissed with contempt as decadent, feeble, corrupt, and inept is emotionally very difficult to accept," he said in a 1999 interview. "The sense of cultural supremacy of the Americans will make this adjustment most difficult."

In some ways, Chinese exceptionalism is more sweeping than its American counterpart. "The [Chinese] empire saw itself as the center of the civilized universe," the historian Harry Gelber wrote in his 2001 book, *Nations Out of Empires* ^[8]. During the imperial era, "the Chinese scholar-bureaucrat did not think of a 'China' or a 'Chinese civilization' in the modern sense at all. For him, there were the Han people and, beyond that, only barbarism. Whatever was not civilized was, by definition, barbaric."

To this day, the Chinese take great pride in their civilizational achievements. "Our nation is a great nation," Chinese President Xi Jinping declared in a 2012 speech. "During the civilization and development process of more than 5,000 years, the Chinese nation has made an indelible contribution to the civilization and advancement of mankind." Indeed, Xi claimed in his 2014 book, *The Governance of China* ^[9], that "China's continuous civilization is not equal to anything on earth, but a unique achievement in world history."

Americans, too, see themselves as the vanguard of civilization, especially when it comes to political development. A passion for freedom is enshrined in the core document of the American political creed, the Declaration of Independence, which proclaims that "all men are created equal" and that they are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights." The declaration specifies that these rights include "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" and asserts that these are not matters for debate but rather "self-evident" truths. As the American historian Richard Hofstadter wrote, "It has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies, but to be one." In contrast, order is the central political value for Chinese—and order results from hierarchy. Individual liberty, as Americans understand it, disrupts hierarchy; in the Chinese view, it invites chaos.

DO AS I SAY . . . AND AS I DO?

These philosophical differences find expression in each country's concept of government. Although animated by a deep distrust of authority, the founders of the United States ^[10] recognized that society required government. Otherwise, who would protect citizens from foreign threats or violations of their rights by criminals at home? They wrestled, however, with a dilemma: a government powerful enough to perform its essential functions would tend toward tyranny. To manage this challenge, they designed a government of "separated institutions sharing power," as the historian Richard Neustadt described it. This deliberately produced constant struggle among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, which led to delay, gridlock, and even dysfunction. But it also provided checks and balances against abuse.

The Chinese conception of government and its role in society could hardly be more different. As Lee observed, “The country’s history and cultural records show that when there is a strong center (Beijing or Nanjing), the country is peaceful and prosperous. When the center is weak, then the provinces and their counties are run by little warlords.” Accordingly, the sort of strong central government that Americans resist represents to the Chinese the principal agent advancing order and the public good at home and abroad.

For Americans, democracy is the only just form of government: authorities derive their legitimacy from the consent of the governed. That is not the prevailing view in China, where it is common to believe that the government earns or loses political legitimacy based on its performance. In a provocative TED Talk delivered in 2013, the Shanghai-based venture capitalist [Eric Li](#) ^[11] challenged democracy’s presumed superiority. “I was asked once, ‘The party wasn’t voted in by election. Where is the source of legitimacy?’” he recounted. “I said, ‘How about competency?’” He went on to remind his audience that in 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party took power, “China was mired in civil war, dismembered by foreign aggression, [and] average life expectancy at that time [was] 41 years. Today [China] is the second-largest economy in the world, an industrial powerhouse, and its people live in increasing prosperity.”

Washington and Beijing also have distinctly different approaches when it comes to promoting their fundamental political values internationally. Americans believe that human rights and democracy are universal aspirations, requiring only the example of the United States (and sometimes a neoimperialist nudge) to be realized everywhere. The United States is, as Huntington wrote in his follow-on book, *The Clash of Civilizations*, “a missionary nation,” driven by the belief “that the non-Western peoples should commit themselves to the Western values . . . and should embody these values in their institutions.” Most Americans believe that democratic rights will benefit anyone, anywhere in the world.

Over the decades, Washington has pursued a foreign policy that seeks to advance the cause of democracy—even, on occasion, attempting to impose it on those who have failed to embrace it themselves. In contrast, although the Chinese believe that others can look up to them, admire their virtues, and even attempt to mimic their behavior, China’s leaders have not proselytized on behalf of their approach. As the American diplomat [Henry Kissinger](#) ^[12] has noted, imperial China “did not export its ideas but let others come to seek them.” And unsurprisingly, Chinese leaders have been deeply suspicious of U.S. efforts to convert them to the American creed. In the late 1980s, Deng Xiaoping, who led China from 1978 until 1989 and began the country’s process of economic liberalization, complained to a visiting dignitary that Western talk of “human rights, freedom, and democracy is designed only to safeguard the interests of the strong, rich countries, which take advantage of their strength to bully weak countries, and which pursue hegemony and practice power politics.”

THINKING FAST AND SLOW

The American and Chinese senses of the past, present, and future are fundamentally distinct. Americans proudly celebrated their country turning 241 in July; the Chinese are fond of noting that their history spans five millennia. U.S. leaders often refer to “the American experiment,” and their sometimes haphazard policies reflect that attitude. China, by contrast, sees itself as a fixture of the universe: it always was; it always will be.

Because of their expansive sense of time, Chinese leaders are careful to distinguish the acute from the chronic and the urgent from the merely important. It is difficult to imagine a U.S. political leader suggesting that a major foreign policy problem should be put on the proverbial shelf for a generation. That, however, is precisely what Deng did in 1979, when he led the Chinese side in negotiations with Japan over the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and accepted an eventual, rather than an immediate, solution to the dispute.

Ever more sensitive to the demands of the news cycle and popular opinion, U.S. politicians take to Twitter or announce alliterative, bullet-point policy plans that promise quick solutions. In contrast, Chinese leaders are strategically patient: as long as trends are moving in their favor, they are comfortable waiting out a problem. Americans think of themselves as problem solvers. Reflecting their short-termism, they see problems as discrete issues to be addressed now so that they can move on to the next ones. The American novelist and historian Gore Vidal ^[13] once called his country “the United States of Amnesia”—a place where every idea is an innovation and every crisis is unprecedented. This contrasts sharply with the deep historical and institutional memory of the Chinese, who assume that there is nothing new under the sun.

Indeed, Chinese leaders tend to believe that many problems cannot be solved and must instead be managed. They see challenges as long term and iterative; issues they face today resulted from processes that have evolved over the past year, decade, or century. Policy actions they take today will simply contribute to that evolution. For instance, since 1949, Taiwan has been ruled by what Beijing considers rogue Chinese nationalists. Although Chinese leaders insist that Taiwan remains an integral part of China, they have pursued a long-term strategy involving tightening economic and social entanglements to slowly suck the island back into the fold.

WHO'S THE BOSS?

The civilizational clash that will make it hardest for Washington and Beijing to escape Thucydides' trap emerges from their competing conceptions of world order ^[14]. China's treatment of its own citizens provides the script for its relations with weaker neighbors abroad. The Chinese Communist Party maintains order by enforcing an authoritarian hierarchy that demands the deference and compliance of citizens. China's international behavior reflects similar expectations of order: in an unscripted moment during a 2010 meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, then Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi responded to complaints about Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea by telling his regional counterparts and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that “China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that's just a fact.”

By contrast, American leaders aspire to an international rule of law that is essentially U.S. domestic rule of law writ large. At the same time, they also recognize the realities of power in the Hobbesian global jungle, where it is better to be the lion than the lamb. Washington often tries to reconcile this tension by depicting a world in which the United States is a benevolent hegemon, acting as the world's lawmaker, policeman, judge, and jury.

Washington urges other powers to accept the rule-based international order over which it presides. But through Chinese eyes, it looks like the Americans make the rules and others obey Washington's commands. General Martin Dempsey ^[15], former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, became familiar with the predictable resentment this elicited from China.

“One of the things that fascinated me about the Chinese is whenever I would have a conversation with them about international standards or international rules of behavior, they would inevitably point out that those rules were made when they were absent from the world stage,” Dempsey remarked in an interview with this magazine last year.

YOU CAN GO YOUR OWN WAY

The United States has spent nearly three decades as the world’s most powerful country. During that time, Washington’s massive influence on world affairs has made it crucial for elites and leaders in other nations to understand American culture and the U.S. approach to strategy. Americans, on the other hand, have often felt that they have the luxury of not needing to think too hard about the worldviews of people elsewhere—a lack of interest encouraged by the belief, held by many American elites, that the rest of the world has been slowly but surely becoming more like the United States anyway.

In recent years, however, [the rise of China](#) ^[16] has challenged that indifference. Policymakers in the United States are beginning to recognize that they must improve their understanding of China—especially Chinese strategic thinking. In particular, U.S. policymakers have begun to see distinctive traits in the way their Chinese counterparts think about the use of military force. In deciding whether, when, and how to attack adversaries, Chinese leaders have for the most part been rational and pragmatic. Beyond that, however, American policymakers and analysts have identified five presumptions and predilections that offer further clues to China’s likely strategic behavior in confrontations.

First, in both war and peace, Chinese strategy is unabashedly driven by realpolitik and unencumbered by any serious need to justify Chinese behavior in terms of international law or ethical norms. This allows the Chinese government to be ruthlessly flexible, since it feels few constraints from prior rationales and is largely immune to criticisms of inconsistency. So, for example, when Kissinger arrived in China in 1971 to begin secret talks about a U.S.-Chinese rapprochement, he found his interlocutors unblinkered by ideology and brutally candid about China’s national interests. Whereas Kissinger and U.S. President Richard Nixon felt it necessary to justify the compromise they ultimately reached to end the Vietnam War as “peace with honor,” the Chinese leader Mao Zedong felt no need to pretend that in establishing relations with the capitalist United States to strengthen communist China’s position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, he was somehow bolstering a larger socialist international movement.

Just as China’s practical approach to international politics arguably gives China an edge over the United States, so, too, does China’s obsessively holistic strategic worldview. Chinese planners see everything as connected to everything else. The evolving context in which a strategic situation occurs determines what the Chinese call *shi*. This term has no direct English translation but can be rendered as the “potential energy” or “momentum” inherent in any circumstance at a given moment. It comprises geography and terrain, weather, the balance of forces, surprise, morale, and many other elements. “Each factor influences the others,” as Kissinger wrote in his 2011 book, *On China*, “giving rise to subtle shifts in momentum and relative advantage.” Thus, a skilled Chinese strategist spends most of his time patiently “observing and cultivating changes in the strategic landscape” and moves only when everything is in optimal alignment. Then he strikes swiftly. To an observer, the result appears inevitable.

War for Chinese strategists is primarily psychological and political. In Chinese thinking, an opponent's perception of facts on the ground may be just as important as the facts themselves. For imperial China, creating and sustaining the image of a civilization so superior that it represented "the center of the universe" served to deter enemies from challenging Chinese dominance. Today, a narrative of China's inevitable rise and the United States' irreversible decline plays a similar role.

Traditionally, the Chinese have sought victory not in a decisive battle but through incremental moves designed to gradually improve their position. David Lai, an expert on Asian military affairs, has illustrated this approach by comparing the Western game of chess with its Chinese equivalent, *weiqi* (often referred to as go). In chess, players seek to dominate the center of the board and conquer the opponent. In *weiqi*, players seek to surround the opponent. If the chess master sees five or six moves ahead, the *weiqi* master sees 20 or 30. Attending to every dimension in the broader relationship with an adversary, the Chinese strategist resists rushing prematurely toward victory, instead aiming to build incremental advantage. "In the Western tradition, there is a heavy emphasis on the use of force; the art of war is largely limited to the battlefields; and the way to fight is force on force," Lai wrote in a 2004 analysis for the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute. By contrast, "the philosophy behind *go* . . . is to compete for relative gain rather than seeking complete annihilation of the opponent forces." In a wise reminder, Lai warns that "it is dangerous to play *go* with the chess mindset."

LET'S MAKE A DEAL

Washington would do well to heed that warning. In the coming years, any number of flash points could produce a crisis in U.S.-Chinese relations, including further territorial disputes over the South China Sea ^[17] and tensions over North Korea's burgeoning nuclear weapons program. Since it will take at least another decade or more for China's military capabilities to fully match those of the United States, the Chinese will be cautious and prudent about any lethal use of force against the Americans. Beijing will treat military force as a subordinate instrument in its foreign policy, which seeks not victory in battle but the achievement of national objectives. It will bolster its diplomatic and economic connections with its neighbors, deepening their dependency on China, and use economic leverage to encourage (or coerce) cooperation on other issues. Although China has traditionally viewed war as a last resort, should it conclude that long-term trend lines are no longer moving in its favor and that it is losing bargaining power, it could initiate a limited military conflict to attempt to reverse the trends.

The last time the United States faced extremely high Thucydidean risks was during the Cold War—especially during the Cuban missile crisis. Reflecting on the crisis a few months after its resolution, U.S. President John F. Kennedy identified one enduring lesson: "Above all, while defending our own vital interests, nuclear powers must avert those confrontations which bring an adversary to a choice of either a humiliating retreat or nuclear war." In spite of Moscow's hard-line rhetoric, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev ultimately concluded that he could compromise on nuclear arms in Cuba. Likewise, Kissinger and Nixon later discovered that the Chinese ideologue Mao was quite adept at giving ground when it served China's interests.

Xi and U.S. President Donald Trump have both made maximalist claims, especially when it comes to the South China Sea. But both are also dealmakers. The better the Trump administration understands how Beijing sees China's role in the world and the country's core interests, the better prepared it will be to negotiate. The problem remains psychological projection: even seasoned State Department officials too often mistakenly assume that China's vital interests mirror those of the United States. The officials now crafting the Trump administration's approach to China would be wise to read the ancient Chinese philosopher Sun-tzu: "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle."

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