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The Postcolonial Cold War

How the U.S. and China Fought Over the Third World

Timothy Nunan

TIMOTHY NUNAN is an Assistant Professor in the Center for Global History at the Free University of Berlin.

In an August [interview](#) ^[1] with *The American Prospect*, then White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon said that the United States is “at economic war with China. It’s in all their literature. They’re not shy about saying what they’re doing. One of us is going to be a hegemon in 25 or 30 years and it’s gonna be them if we go down this path.” If the United States continues to lose the economic war, Bannon said, “we’re five years away, I think, ten years at the most, of [hitting an inflection point](#) ^[2] from which we’ll never be able to recover.” Seemingly in line with these comments, U.S. President Donald Trump, who campaigned on an agenda of economic nationalism, has launched investigations into Chinese intellectual property theft that could lead to U.S. tariffs on Chinese imports. At the same time, however, U.S. officials have sought to win Beijing’s cooperation in taming an increasingly belligerent North Korea.

The Trump administration’s mood swings on China—viewing it sometimes as a threat to U.S. preeminence and sometimes as a valuable partner—are nothing new. Indeed, as the George Washington University historian Gregg Brazinsky shows in his timely new book, *Winning the Third World: Sino-American Rivalry During the Cold War* ^[3], Washington has long feared that “China will spread a model of political and economic development that will fundamentally undermine the liberal international order that the United States seeks to uphold.”

Winning the Third World examines how [China and the United States](#) ^[4] competed with each other during the mid-twentieth century for influence among postcolonial nations. More fundamentally, Beijing and Washington sparred over the structure of the postcolonial international order itself. Following the wave of decolonization after World War II, Maoist China was determined to establish itself as first among equals in an independent Afro-Asian bloc of countries, an ambition that the United States, newly powerful and secure in its standing among postcolonial countries, was determined to thwart. Despite their best efforts, however, the two countries’ policies toward the postcolonial world—whether Washington’s support for dictators or Beijing’s backing of guerrilla uprisings—discredited them in the eyes of local populations and did little to solve the problems of postcolonial societies. At a moment when many are suggesting the inevitability of conflict between China and the United States, *Winning the Third World* provides a useful reminder of how different ideas about world order have driven Beijing and Washington to clash in the past. Skeptics will question the utility of comparing today’s confrontations to those of the Cold War, when China was committed to exporting revolution rather than cheap consumer goods. But by showing the enduring

importance of status—not Marxism-Leninism—to Chinese views of international order, Brazinsky makes *Winning the Third World* essential reading for anyone interested in the future of U.S.-Chinese relations.

A QUESTION OF STATUS

China's national liberation movement and the United States' rise to superpower status both occurred at the same time in the early twentieth century. The last Chinese imperial dynasty, the Qing, collapsed in 1911, ushering in a struggle between Chinese nationalists and communists, with both groups aspiring to lead a national reawakening [5] that would end China's victimization at the hands of European and Japanese imperialists. But China's communist leaders, Brazinsky argues, did not think of international relations in terms of either communist ideology or (as in imperial times) a China-centric hierarchy. Rather, they stressed the need for China to recover its status, "especially among other postcolonial societies, as a means of ending China's history of humiliation and regaining the honor and glory that had been stolen from it."

The desire of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to cultivate ties with the postcolonial world put it into competition with a rising United States, which had become the world's leading industrial power in 1916 and achieved international hegemony following World War II. Washington, like Beijing, portrayed itself as an alternative to imperialism. After World War I, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson had presented the United States as a champion of national self-determination, and since the late nineteenth century U.S. commitments to free trade had led it into conflict with the European (and later, Japanese) imperial trading blocs. During World War II, the United States saw China as an ally against Japan, and in 1942 U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt said that China had to "play its proper role in maintaining peace and prosperity not only in eastern Asia but in the whole world." In Roosevelt's view, a unified China allied with the United States "would help to administer trusteeships in Southeast Asia and elsewhere, thus allowing for the rest of Asia to achieve independence over time." In 1943, Roosevelt invited the nationalist general Chiang Kai-shek to the Cairo Conference, where Chiang played the role of leading statesman alongside Roosevelt and Churchill as they discussed the future of Asia.

The United States' vision was that of a pro-American, nationalist-led China leading a controlled process of decolonization in Asia. This stood in direct tension with the goals of the CCP. Following the Japanese invasion of China in 1937, the so-called Rectification Campaign within the CCP stressed not only Mao's leadership of the Party in China but also the wide applicability of his thought for other colonized peoples. As Zhang Ruxin, an influential proponent of Maoism, explained in 1941, China's experience offered "extremely valuable revolutionary capital" for "the great majority (if not all) of the colonial and semi-colonial states." Actions followed words, and in October 1941 the party hosted the Eastern People's Anti-Fascist Congress in Yan'an, featuring delegates from eighteen countries, including Burma, Korea, and Vietnam. Shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, moreover, Mao ordered the CCP to coordinate with communist parties in Southeast Asia in their shared struggle against the Japanese.

This international dimension to Chinese communism caught the Americans by surprise. Younger China hands saw the CCP as agrarian reformers with little interest in world revolution. Operating under this assumption, U.S. diplomats who made it to Yan'an suggested that Washington establish links with the CCP in order to support its fight against the Japanese, or at least to encourage reform among the corrupt and brutal nationalists. Senior figures such as U.S. envoy Patrick J. Hurley, however, rejected this idea, forcing the communists to turn to the Soviet Union for assistance and denying them any voice in the postwar settlement in East Asia. This in turn solidified the CCP's impression, captured in one influential party report, that the United States was "likely to stand in the way of the CCP's ambitions to gain standing both in China and around the world."

After the CCP defeated the nationalists in the brief civil war following the withdrawal of the Japanese, then, the party very quickly found itself in conflict with the United States. This conflict was a product not merely of the United States' refusal to recognize the newly declared People's Republic of China but of Washington and Beijing's very different visions for the postcolonial international order. Washington favored national self-determination within a liberal, capitalist international order [6], but it saw decolonization as a gradual process, with trusteeships for states such as Korea and Vietnam, and it endorsed hierarchies both formal (the UN Security Council) and informal (voting rights at the IMF or World Bank). China, by contrast, promoted economic self-reliance, the immediate liberation of Korea and Vietnam by military means, and the development of anticolonial and communist networks as an alternative to the United Nations. Beijing saw itself, according to Brazinsky, as building an "informal, antihierarchical hierarchy" of postcolonial nations in which China would be first among equals—a contrast to the deference allegedly demanded by the United States and Soviet Union.

These different visions led to China and the United States into open conflict, first in the Korean War, in which China backed North Korea and the United States backed the South, and later in Vietnam, where China supported the communist insurgency against the French and then the Americans. At the Bandung Conference in 1955, which sought to promote greater cooperation between African and Asian countries, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai convincingly presented China's militant stance toward Taiwan and the United States as compatible with other leaders' desires for peace and stability in the region. With Washington still recognizing the nationalists in Taipei as the legitimate rulers of China, Beijing maneuvered to gain recognition from post-colonial states such as Egypt, Iraq, Guinea, and the government-in-exile of the Algerian National Liberation Front. Brazinsky shows how China pursued these policy choices not to spread communism but to promote anticolonial liberation. Mao's order to fight alongside the North Koreans, for example, described the war as one in defense of the interests of "the people of all Eastern countries," not just China or Korea.

WHY BUY THE MAO?

Brazinsky's book is strongest when he shows how Washington and Beijing's misguided views of the nature of their conflict led them to adopt counterproductive policies. American leaders came to see Mao's China as dangerous because decolonization, in their view, threatened to complicate the East-West ideological conflict with a North-South racial one. Beijing lacked the resources of Moscow, but the Chinese were more plausible champions of militant racist anti-imperialism than were the Russians in charge of the Soviet Union.

Because the Americans perceived the Chinese challenge as so radical, they admitted little middle ground. Washington was so concerned with defending South Vietnam [7], for example, that it tolerated Saigon's attacks on Viet Cong camps in neutral Cambodia. When Cambodian guerrillas opposed to the government in Phnom Penh began conducting radio broadcasts from South Vietnam, the Cambodian government threatened to end all Western aid programs and ally with China unless the broadcasts were stopped. The United States did nothing, and Cambodia turned to China for military and economic aid and closed its embassy in Washington. The Americans, that is, had been so obsessed with keeping Vietnam out of the communist camp that they drove smaller countries into the arms of the Chinese and discredited themselves as a champion of a just international order.

Similar missteps marked U.S. trade and aid policy. From 1950 to 1971, the United States enforced a comprehensive embargo on all trade with China in order to hinder the country's industrial development and isolate it from the international community. During the Korean War, it had successfully pushed for a UN embargo on sending strategic materials to China. But states such as India and Egypt rejected the legitimacy of the UN embargo, and Beijing was able to barter (often on disadvantageous terms) with countries such as Indonesia and Sri Lanka in order to avoid isolation. The embargo did not significantly weaken China's economy, and Beijing boasted that its survival in the face of American imperialism had proved the viability of its economic model and exposed Washington as an imperialist power.

Although both countries provided aid to the postcolonial world, China often did so with a greater eye toward symbolism. In southern Africa, for example, Tanzania and landlocked Zambia had proposed a railway connecting the copper mines of Zambia with an Indian Ocean port—all without crossing white-ruled states. Western countries and the Soviet Union balked at funding the project, unconvinced of its economic utility. The Chinese, however, agreed to build the railway in 1967, understanding that the project was as much about self-sufficiency and opposition to white rule as it was about economics. The United States countered with a road project following the same route, but it failed to become a major avenue of commerce for want of cargo trucks in either country. Its main destiny was, ironically, to transport supplies for the Chinese railway.

But China also made several missteps that limited its influence in the Third World. Beijing failed to understand, Brazinsky says, that "the dominance of Maoist ideology [8] over virtually every sphere of activity" in China repelled foreign audiences and decreased Chinese prestige abroad. For example, one Indian journalist who

observed a dance performance by a Chinese troupe in the winter of 1954-55 came away distressed, asking why the Chinese had “ruined this superb if limited art by weighting the feet of the Angel of Grace with the lead of ideology.” Beijing’s suppression of a 1959 uprising in Tibet, meanwhile, damaged China’s image in Buddhist-majority countries, and its 1962 war with India drove the latter to seek more assistance from the United States and the Soviet Union. The war with India ruined China’s image as a steward of peace within Asia, which it had taken great care to cultivate at Bandung. Behavior like this also split the Afro-Asian movement into ever more camps: those countries, such as China and Indonesia, that favored militant confrontation with the superpowers; and those, such as Egypt and India, that favored a more moderate course of “non-alignment” that would exclude Communist China. In 1965, China attempted to organize a Bandung II conference in Algiers to promote its more aggressive vision of anti-imperialism, which called for militant confrontation with “white” powers such as the United States and Soviet Union. But Beijing’s radicalism soured many countries on Chinese internationalism, even before a coup d’état in Algiers led to the conference’s ultimate cancellation.

A central theme in Brazinsky’s narrative is how China’s promotion of Maoism as the central revolutionary doctrine for anticolonial guerrillas hindered Beijing’s chances to challenge Washington and Moscow in the Global South. China supported armed guerrilla movements in countries like Algeria, Laos, Lesotho, and Vietnam from the mid-1950s onward, providing weapons, money, training in China, and translated copies of Mao’s writings on guerrilla warfare. But China’s insistence that guerrillas follow Maoist orthodoxy was self-defeating, contributing, for instance, to the collapse of an uprising in the Congo. Guerrillas calling themselves the Simbas (“lions”) conquered the eastern half of the country in early 1964. But even after the leader of the Simbas declared Mao “not only the liberator of China but also the liberator of the whole world,” Chinese diplomats still felt that the Simbas “in reality did not have a great interest in our experience” and withheld support. While China hesitated, Belgian and U.S. military interventions weakened the Simba movement. Rather than learning from the experience, however, Beijing blamed the Simbas’ defeat on their failure to accept Maoism. Within a year, Africa’s largest country was in the hands of the pro-Western tyrant Joseph Mobutu, and China’s insistence on purity had left it without a revolutionary base in Africa.

Closer to home, the CCP was so convinced of the contribution of Maoism to the Vietnamese struggle that it overlooked how the Vietnamese were more concerned with defeating American imperialism than proving Mao’s theses right. As a result, Beijing failed to appreciate that Hanoi, which was receiving more and more military aid and training from the Soviet Union, had little interest in opposing Moscow as a “social imperialist” power, as Maoist doctrine dictated. After the war, Hanoi even concluded a formal alliance with Moscow in 1978. Worse, Vietnam had regional ambitions of its own. After the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia in 1978, replacing the Beijing-allied Khmer Rouge government with a puppet regime loyal to Hanoi and Moscow, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping ordered a limited invasion of Vietnam in 1979. The war resulted in around 28,000 Chinese combat deaths in one month, nearly half as many as the

Americans had experienced in Vietnam in 20 years. China had invested considerable resources into securing an independent, unified Vietnamese state, but its obsession with the universal applicability of Maoism harmed its status in Southeast Asia.

CHANGING GEARS

Brazinsky's account largely focuses on the 1950s and early 1960s. (The book relies on documentation from the Chinese Foreign Ministry, which, even when it was briefly open from 2004 to 2012, prevented research into the years of the Cultural Revolution.) Yet as the closing chapters to *Winning the Third World* demonstrate, by the end of the 1960s both U.S. and Chinese leaders realized that cooperation, not conflict, offered the best prospects to enhance their nations' status. Brazinsky points to a June 1966 report by the State Department and the Pentagon as a turning point in U.S. thinking on China. The United States could never countenance "the domination of Asia by any single power," the report noted, but it ought to seek ways to offer China "status and respect which could substitute in part for the unattainable goals of regional domination and superpower status." This report did not change policy, but Lyndon Johnson spoke a month later in terms of engagement rather than isolation, noting that "lasting peace can never come to Asia as long as the 700 million people of mainland China are isolated by their rulers from the outside world."

U.S. President Richard Nixon, who entered office in 1969, delivered on this vision. "Whereas previous administrations had all struggled to isolate China and destroy its prestige in the Third World," Brazinsky writes, "the Nixon administration wanted to reintegrate the PRC into the international community and afford it the respect due to a major power." Nixon understood that American primacy could only be maintained by transforming Washington into the dominant element in a geopolitical triangle with Beijing and Moscow. Nixon's own sensitivity toward slights and insistence on respect, moreover, made him an ideal interlocutor with Beijing. "Treat him (as Emperor)," wrote Nixon in his preparatory notes for his 1972 talk with Mao. "Praise the people—art, ancient. Praise poems. Love of country." Crucially, Nixon did not make U.S.-Chinese rapprochement conditional on China abandoning its revolutionary claims. "You have a position, in your country and in the whole socialist movement and the world," Nixon explained in his final conversation with Zhou, "a position of principle which we, of course, expect you to maintain."

Fortunately for Nixon, the CCP had adjusted its own conceptions of how best to achieve status by the time of his visit. Chastened by the Cultural Revolution and close brushes with the Soviet Union, Beijing had adopted a more pragmatic diplomacy, establishing relations with "reactionary" states such as Iran, Turkey, and Zaire. Beijing continued to present itself as the leader of the Third World at the United Nations, but in the 1980s it cooperated closely with the United States in opposing Marxist regimes in the "global South." For instance, China worked with the United States and apartheid South Africa to attempt to topple a Soviet- and Cuban-backed regime in Angola, and joined the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan in supporting the Afghan mujahideen's overthrow of a Moscow-allied regime in Kabul. One of the lessons of Brazinsky's account is therefore

the extent to which the Soviet threat allowed for U.S.-Chinese cooperation in the global South and the global economy.

WINNING THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY?

Winning the Third World appears just as the Trump administration [9] is throwing a wrench into an already lively debate about U.S.-Chinese relations. Brazinsky's book proves valuable because it shows how differences between American and Chinese views about China's status in the international order—and not just ideological fears of communist subversion—have long driven conflict between the two countries. China today may be a different animal than it was under Mao, but it still presents itself to Africans and Asians as a model nation and the champion of a new non-hierarchical world order. When Xi Jinping opened the new Belt and Road Forum in May 2017, he championed “a new type of international relations” that would respect the “sovereignty” and “territorial integrity” of all nations. Beijing has abandoned its more radical claims, but the fundamentals of its approach—to promote China's status within a non-hierarchical system—have changed very little.

Rather than viewing China's claims to status as a threat, however, Brazinsky offers wisdom about ways to channel them, not least with regard to issues, such as trade, that engage the Americans who voted for Trump. For example, Brazinsky points out that although China still sees itself as a model for the developing world, many in Africa and Asia remain skeptical of Beijing's intentions. “The Western approach of imposing its values and political system on other countries is not acceptable to China. We focus on mutual development, not promoting one country at the expense of the other,” said Wang Hongyi, a Chinese diplomat and scholar of Africa, at a 2006 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in Beijing. Yet influential Africans, such as former Nigerian Central Bank Governor Lamindo Sanusi, have criticized China as “a significant contributor to Africa's deindustrialization and underdevelopment.” In Sanusi's view, a flood of cheap Chinese steel and consumer goods to Africa have made it impossible for African firms to compete, while Chinese mining operations have relied on imported Chinese labor and technology, rather than skills transfers to local populations—what Sanusi calls “the essence of colonialism.” A similar story might be told of Laos since 2011, where a Chinese railway project has aroused concerns over land rights and labor standards, or of Sri Lanka, where Chinese-built seaports and airports have been funded by unrepayable loans from Beijing. Add in concerns over land appropriations and the environmental impact, and these projects form part of an arc of disappointment regarding China's influence in the developing world.

Yet as Brazinsky stresses, the United States should restrain itself from celebrating others' disillusionment with China as it did in the Cold War. U.S.-Chinese competition brought very few gains for Africans or Asians. Today, however, Brazinsky stresses how the two countries could cooperate on issues such as public health and disease control, as they did during the 2014 Ebola epidemic in western Africa. And whereas talk of an economic war with China takes for granted that the country's low labor standards, poor environmental regulation, and export dumping all serve Chinese national interests,

Brazinsky stresses that “only by making itself accountable to global environmental and labor standards and tempering its nationalism can China ever regain the Middle Kingdom status that it once enjoyed.”

Whether this approach could prove successful in Asia is less clear. Beijing might, for instance, be convinced to accept American intellectual property laws or Sri Lankan labor codes as tools to enhance its prestige. As Brazinsky’s book reminds us, however, early U.S. engagement with China conceived of status in international society as something that could “substitute in part” for “regional domination and superpower status.” But few today would doubt that China dominates its region or that it is a superpower. Ironically, in Brazinsky’s view, China’s best bet for evicting the United States from the region and securing its own status would be “a generous, self-confident [Chinese] nationalism” that would make U.S. bases in South Korea and Japan appear superfluous. Yet Chinese nationalism remains so imprisoned by memories of injuries at the hands of Westerners and the Japanese that such a redefinition seems unlikely. More than that, such a redefinition of status would require empathy and imagination from one’s adversaries as well—qualities possessed by only a select few U.S. presidents during the Cold War, and almost completely absent from the White House today.

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