

The American Psyche in a Newly Competitive Era: Some Initial Reflections

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Mr. Wyne cautions that the construct of “great-power competition” should not substitute for a coherent national strategy oriented toward desired steady states, and that an excessive focus on competition as an imperative unto itself could lead the United States into errors of overcommitment. Mr. Wyne questions how much policy guidance emerges from oft-stated objectives such as remaining the world’s foremost power or maintaining the current postwar order. The lack of strategic clarity along with the anxiety inherent in preeminence make the United States vulnerable to asymmetric tactics of manipulation. Mr. Wyne concludes by exploring specific aspects of “great-power competition,” including Sino-Russian relations and US-China competition in the Asia-Pacific.

The Imperative of Articulating Long-Term Strategic Objectives

Close to two decades after the publication of his seminal text *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (1982), the historian John Lewis Gaddis considered how, if at all, he would have written it differently. He concluded that “there were greater sources of strength on the Western side of the [Cold War]—and elements of continuity in American grand strategy—than had been apparent at the time I wrote my book.” The most critical, in Gaddis’s judgment, was “an implicit agreement, within the American foreign policy establishment, on the fundamental purposes of containment: on *its projected end point*” (emphasis mine). “This single, simple, and continuous priority,” he explained, supplied “a center of gravity for American Cold War strategy: whatever the oscillations between parties or between approaches, this fundamental objective always remained.”

The United States has lacked a comparable ballast since the Soviet Union’s dissolution. At least as presently conceptualized, the construct of “great-power competition” seems unlikely to furnish one, not only because its two central foci—China and Russia—have markedly different capacities, strategies, and ambitions, but also because it does not articulate a steady state. Recall the old quip, often attributed to Yogi Berra: “If you do not know where you are going, any path will get you there.”

Competition is a means, not an end. The more that the United States treats it as an imperative unto itself, the more that it risks conflating action with accomplishment (consider a seesaw, which continues to move but ultimately stays in place) and losing the ability and/or willingness to distinguish between

¹ As I am very much in the nascent stages of formulating my thoughts on the construct of “great-power competition”—both its analytical foundations and its prescriptive implications—I hasten to note that what follows is a series of initial, largely self-contained reflections; it is not intended to be a coherent narrative.

unfavorable outcomes in world affairs that significantly undermine its national interests and those that undercut them only marginally. It would be imprudent to hope that the accumulation of notionally “competitive” measures will reveal a coherent strategy in due course; it would be more sensible, instead, for Washington to envision alternative futures in which it is able to advance its vital national interests and shape an order that is consonant with their continued pursuit, and to formulate strategies that might help those scenarios to materialize.

The two potential objectives that do come to mind, unfortunately, would not appear to offer much policymaking guidance. First, suppose that the United States were to endeavor to remain the world’s foremost power. Even if it were henceforth to commit no self-inflicted strategic errors, the “rise of the rest” would virtually assure that the United States would be unable to maintain its present degree of centrality in world affairs. While there is good reason to believe that it can, and will, remain *primus inter pares* indefinitely, it cannot freeze in place the present distribution of global power—a reality that raises important questions: what is the minimum margin of preeminence that Washington would deem acceptable, and how would it assess whether it was staying above that threshold?

Second, suppose that the United States simply undertook to maintain the current postwar order. Attempting to lock it into place could further disillusion countries—even sympathetic participants—who ask why they should indefinitely be beholden to a system that they had little to no role in constructing. On the other hand, aiming to integrate China and Russia more fully into the postwar order could risk diluting its normative essence, making it strain under the weight of internal contradictions: the Brookings Institution’s Thomas Wright [ventures](#) that such a gambit would lead us back into “an era when a few people carved the world up into spheres of influence, rather than a system where rules, values, and votes play a leading role.” Implicit in the discussion of both objectives, however, is the presumption that the threats to the postwar order are principally external; unfortunately, and perhaps more importantly, that architecture is also under duress from within: the US adoption of an “America First” foreign policy—with its emphasis on transactional diplomacy and its skepticism of multilateral accords and institutions—and the ascent of disintegrationist elements within the European Union have collectively weakened the transatlantic project that has buttressed the postwar order for nearly three-quarters of a century.

Even if Washington did not have to worry about the financial challenges inherent in undergirding a global system, it would eventually confront the specter of strategic exhaustion were it to assume uncircumscribed competition as an indefinite mandate. Despite its singular capacity, it does not have that luxury: fiscal imperatives will increasingly require it to pursue a foreign policy that prioritizes the defense of what *Foreign Affairs* Editor-in-Chief Gideon Rose [calls](#) the “core” of the postwar order over that of its “periphery.” The Congressional Budget Office [projects](#) that the United States “will spend more on interest [payments on federal debt] than it spends on Medicaid in 2020; more in 2023 than it spends on national defense; and more in 2025 than it spends on all nondefense discretionary programs combined.” This trajectory will increasingly curtail America’s agency.

In addition, a foreign policy that avows the necessity of tradeoffs but admits none in practice runs counter to the basic precepts of strategy: the United States cannot credibly assess, on the one hand, that the nerve center of world affairs is, and increasingly will be, the Asia-Pacific, and insist, on the other hand, that it will commit as significantly to other regions as it will to that one. Foreign policy entails the continual reallocation of finite equities abroad; it does not permit the indefinite creation of

new ones. While Washington would be remiss to neglect Russian revanchism and turbulence in the Middle East, it may consider managing them within an eastward-looking framework that appreciates the Asia-Pacific's growing importance to global growth: PricewaterhouseCoopers forecasts that four of the world's ten largest economies in 2050 will belong to Asian countries, with China ranking first, India ranking second, Indonesia ranking fourth, and Japan ranking eighth.

Pretensions to Omnipotence

One might contend that the world's lone superpower need not be overly concerned with the purported necessity for choice, given the unrivaled freedom of maneuver it enjoys—perhaps the greatest of any power in history. One might posit, alternatively, that the United States does not have the luxury to prioritize certain regions over others, lest it convey the impression that it is disinterested in maintaining the whole of the order that it has constructed—and, in so doing, embolden revisionist elements. Though they arise from different sentiments—complacency and concern—both contentions exaggerate US agency. Few judgments have proven as essential in the shaping, and as damaging to the conduct, of postwar—and especially post-Cold War—US foreign policy as the belief that the United States can strengthen its position abroad through sheer dint of unilateral exertion. Then-Secretary of State John Foster Dulles articulated the folly of that judgment in an October 1957 essay for *Foreign Affairs*:

There still remains a nostalgia for the “good old days.” This is reinforced by recurrent demonstrations that, great as is our strength, we are not omnipotent. We cannot, by fiat, produce the kind of a world we want. Even nations which depend greatly upon us do not always follow what we believe to be the right course. For they are independent nations, and not our satellites. Our power and policy are but one significant factor in the world in which we live. In combination with other factors we are able to influence importantly the course of events. But we cannot deal in absolutes.²

The resilience of the aforementioned presumption has tracked with the endurance of declinism: if one believes that the United States should essentially be able to dictate the course of world affairs, one will understandably be inclined to adduce any outcome that runs counter to its national interests as evidence of its impotence. In reality, while Washington has endured many setbacks in the postwar era, ranging from the “loss” of China to wide-ranging Soviet inroads across Africa and Asia, it has accumulated and maintained an unrivaled level of power.³ Declinist thinking, of course, can be strategically useful even if it is analytically misguided: the political scientist Samuel Huntington argued near the end of the Cold War that “the United States is unlikely to decline so long as its public is periodically convinced that it is about to decline.” His optimism, though, requires a prudent harnessing of that fear. If Washington responds to its present anxiety about China's resurgence by strengthening its own economic vibrancy and working to forge a more inclusive order, that sentiment could be an

² See also D. W. Brogan, “The Illusion of American Omnipotence,” *Harper's Magazine*, No. 205 (December 1952): pp. 21-28.

³ I discuss some of those setbacks—and the attendant declinist prognostications—in “Myth of decline,” *American Review* (August 2014): pp. 38-46.

asset; if, however, it responds by further overextending itself and undertaking to suppress the eastward shift in geopolitical gravity, that same sentiment could be a liability.⁴

The supposition of, or hope for, something approaching US omnipotence militates against the imperative of prioritization; paradoxically, the political scientist Robert Jervis explains, the preponderance of America's power breeds commensurate distress: "The very fact that the United States has interests throughout the world leads to the fear that undesired changes in one area could undermine its interests elsewhere....Disturbances that would be dismissed in a multipolar or bipolar world loom much larger for the hegemon because it is present in all corners of the globe and everything seems interconnected."⁵ Thus, rather than husbanding its power, Washington tends to err on the side of omnipresence and overcommitment.⁶

America's Psyche

The anxiety inherent in preeminence makes the United States susceptible to manipulation. While America's adversaries and competitors will likely continue to invest in asymmetric capabilities aimed at limiting its capacity to project force, they recognize that they would incur enormous losses were they to confront it directly. As such, they may instead seek to provoke the United States into errors of overcommitment that emerge from a lack of strategic clarity:

Goading the United States to Overreact: Osama bin Laden gloated in late 2004 that he could easily "provoke and bait" Washington. While it cost al-Qa'ida at most \$500,000 to execute the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States has spent at least \$2.8 trillion on counterterrorism-related efforts, and, in the judgment of the Brookings Institution's Michael O'Hanlon, "stopped looking for an exit from the Middle East." How would the United States respond to another terrorist attack on its homeland?

Compelling the United States to Adopt a Reactive Foreign Policy: Despite confronting formidable challenges at home and abroad, Xi Jinping's China has proven skilled at conveying an aura of inexorability around its resurgence—and, it appears, at unnerving the United States. Unfortunately, though, the more Washington tries to match Beijing's flurry of activity—whether the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or "Made in China 2025"—the more it will compete on the latter's terms, thereby potentially discounting its unique strategic assets, adopting a more zero-sum approach to bilateral relations, and focusing more on how it can "out-China" China than on how it can become a more dynamic version of its best self.

⁴ Huntington offered valuable advice on leveraging declinism, as I note in "How the US should frame its approach to China," *Financial Times's* beyondbrics forum (July 24, 2019).

⁵ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. made a similar point nearly three decades before Jervis, albeit in a different geopolitical context: "A recurrent experience of the American people is to discover that some exotic locality of which they had not previously heard is vital to the national security of the United States. An unknown place that had never before disturbed our dreams suddenly becomes...the key to some momentous global conflict." See "Russians and Cubans in Africa," *Wall Street Journal* (May 2, 1978).

⁶ I elaborate on this point in "A Preliminary Critique of the 'Do Something Now' Doctrine," *War on the Rocks* (April 2, 2014).

Inflaming Divisions Between Americans: Russia’s interference in the 2016 presidential election demonstrates its desire and ability to amplify America’s existing societal tensions. Its conduct follows the guidance of General Valery Gerasimov, who concluded in early 2013 that “nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals” had increasingly “exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness.” If Americans assess that their country is under siege from within and become preoccupied with internecine ideological strife, they will find it hard to meet the challenges of an increasingly chaotic and contested external environment.

Sino-Russian Relations

One of those challenges is a stronger relationship between two of the world’s major powers, a challenge that looms especially large in view of the anemic economic growth and internal political tumult afflicting many industrialized democracies. In addition to worrying about purposeful collaboration between China and Russia, the United States may increasingly need to weigh incidental complementarities between their efforts to undercut democracies.⁷

It is important, though, to note their myriad differences. As both a vocal critic and a principal beneficiary of the postwar order, China seems more interested in its gradual modification than in its wholesale dissolution. It is a resurgent power whose economic capacity enables it to pose a gradualist challenge to US preeminence—a challenge rooted principally in commercial expansion and technological innovation. Russia, by contrast, has far less to offer in the way of trading and investment inducements, on account of a poor demographic outlook, declining and now mostly flat oil prices, and years of sanctions. Its economic limitations, in turn, diminish its freedom of maneuver, for it is far less able than China to engage in transactional diplomacy that coopts countries who fear its strategic intentions; it wields considerably less energy leverage over Western Europe than it did a decade ago, and its relationship with China is becoming increasingly asymmetric in favor of the latter. Moscow appears to have concluded that it stands to accrue more influence by opportunistically disrupting the postwar order than by incrementally reintegrating into that system; witness its efforts to hive off territory along its western periphery, destabilize democracies through disinformation operations, and perpetuate Syria’s devolution into carnage.

While China and Russia’s relationship is indeed becoming stronger across multiple dimensions, the economic imbalance between them is increasing apace at the same time: the former’s gross domestic product (GDP) is roughly eight times as large and growing roughly four times as quickly. In addition, China has thus far not hesitated to encroach upon Russia’s traditional spheres of influence. Beijing has little reason to disrupt ties with Moscow, which is a reliable supplier of energy and military equipment.

⁷ Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shullman observe that “Russian foreign policy is confrontational and brazen. China, so far, has used a subtler and more risk-averse strategy, preferring stability that is conducive to building economic ties and influence. Although these two approaches are different and seemingly uncoordinated, taken together, they are having a more corrosive effect on democracy than either would have single-handedly.” See “How Russia and China Undermine Democracy: Can the West Counter the Threat?” *Foreign Affairs* (October 2, 2018).

Moscow, meanwhile, appreciates that it can ill-afford a rupture in its relations with Beijing, which is increasingly the senior partner in their relationship.

While it is unlikely, then, that Washington will be able to drive a wedge between the two, it can at least avoid taking steps that could accelerate their alignment and deepen the substance of that rapprochement; Sino-Russian relations, after all, are still defined more by shared resentments than by common visions. A selective revisionist and an opportunistic spoiler, moreover, will likely have different strategies for undercutting US national interests as well as different ambitions for their respective steady-state positions in world affairs. A US decision to treat China and Russia as a common strategic challenge would almost surely compel them to move more vigorously and intentionally to partner in undercutting US foreign policy.⁸

US-China Competition in the Asia-Pacific

There is little evidence to suggest that America's partners and allies in the Asia-Pacific wish to "choose" between Washington or Beijing, even those that have great reservations about China's regional ambitions. Instead, they seem determined to pursue, for as long as possible, a balancing act that they have been undertaking for the past decade or so: strengthening their diplomatic and military ties with the United States while expanding their trading and investment ties with China. If Washington exhorts them to make a choice, it may end up undercutting its long-term position in the Asia-Pacific: to China's neighbors, after all, China is a geographical fixture and, despite its cooling growth rate, an economic fulcrum; the United States is a distant superpower and, despite its extant margin of preeminence, an inconsistent presence. One of the chief figures behind the Obama administration's much-discussed rebalance, Kurt Campbell, laments that Washington "often pursues its Asia strategy in fits and starts, exhibiting an accordion-like tendency to surge into the region and then retreat as concerns elsewhere drain away American attention."⁹

The credibility of America's professed commitment to the Asia-Pacific diminishes with each such cycle of surging and retreating; the region's evolution, however, does not stop. The founding father of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, observed that "Americans seem to think that Asia is like a movie and that [they] can freeze developments out here whenever the [United States] becomes intensely involved elsewhere in the world."¹⁰ Beyond affording China more room to translate its economic growth into strategic heft, US vacillation compels China's neighbors to take measures that insulate their fortunes from the vagaries of US foreign policy. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Evan Feigenbaum, a prominent architect of the George W. Bush administration's policy towards the Asia-Pacific, warns that "when Washington absents itself (or merely shows disinterest in the region's concerns), Asians will grope for their *own* solutions" (emphasis his). The aftermath of America's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership offers a recent illustration: the 11 remaining parties to

⁸ For further discussion of the differences between the Chinese and Russian challenges to US national interests, see James Dobbins, Howard J. Shatz, and Ali Wyne, *Russia Is a Rogue, Not a Peer; China Is a Peer, Not a Rogue* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019).

⁹ Kurt M. Campbell, *The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia* (New York: Twelve, 2016): p. 138

¹⁰ Graham Allison, Robert D. Blackwill, and Ali Wyne, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master's Insights on China, the United States, and the World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013): p. 28

the agreement proceeded with negotiations, ultimately signing the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. Feigenbaum observes that “for all their tensions with one another, forging agreement on pan-Asian rules beats both ‘Chinese’ rules and no rules.”

Though the United States has long maintained an inconsistent disposition towards the Asia-Pacific, its policy towards China has changed significantly in recent years: unlike its predecessor, the Trump administration regards Beijing not as a challenging partner, but as a security threat. While the Obama administration grew increasingly frustrated by China’s theft of intellectual property and espionage for commercial gain, it largely embraced the proposition that economic interdependence between the two countries was a source of stability in their relations. The Trump administration, by contrast, has forcefully challenged that judgment, arguing that the United States was mistaken to support China’s accession to the World Trade Organization and facilitate the economic revival of what has become its principal competitor. Its national security strategy warns that “China is using economic inducements and penalties,” among other instruments, “to persuade other states to heed its political and security agenda. China’s infrastructure investments and trade strategies reinforce its geopolitical aspirations.” Citing Beijing’s technological aspirations as a threat to US national security, the administration has attempted to restrict high-tech exports to major companies such as Fujian Jinhua and Huawei and pursued an escalating campaign of tariffs on Chinese exports. The Peterson Institute for International Economics’s Chad Bown notes that if the Trump administration carries through with its stated plans, the United States “will push average tariffs on China above 24 percent by December 15, covering 96.8 percent of imports from China.”

It is true, of course, that China had been growing its economic self-sufficiency well before the Trump administration took office. In the aftermath of the 1997-98 Asian-Pacific currency crisis and especially the global financial crisis a decade later, it judged the United States to be an unreliable steward of the world economy, and it adjusted accordingly; where China’s exports to the United States were equivalent to nine percent of its GDP in 2007, that figure stood at just four percent in 2017.

Up until recently, though, there was little evidence that China sought to develop greater autonomy as an alternative to greater interdependence; rather, it appeared set on increasing both. Now, however, in light of the Trump administration’s commitment to readjusting economic ties between the two countries, it appears to have concluded that Washington regards trade entanglement less as an instrument for maintaining stable bilateral ties than for constricting China’s resurgence. As such, what had, until recently, been a gradual Chinese effort to reduce its reliance on the US economy may well accelerate significantly. China is tasked with absorbing the short-term pain of progressive decoupling en route to becoming more competitive over the long run. That charge entails not only rerouting to other countries the exports it has thus far been sending to the United States; it also involves finding alternative providers of high-tech inputs and concurrently growing an indigenous capacity for advanced manufacturing.

Because the United States is the top destination for Chinese exports and, as the near-death of telecommunications giant ZTE affirms, a core supplier of high-tech inputs to China, finding a substitute for Washington will not be easy. The Trump administration’s policy could accrue strategic dividends if it induces partners and allies to follow suit and nurtures the formation of a broad-based coalition to counter China’s economic practices. A recent analysis observes that the country’s leadership fears “a potential coordinated assault by the Trump administration, [the European Union], and Japan on their

unique model of Chinese ‘state capitalism’ that has been integral to the country’s economic success over the past 40 years.”¹¹

The evidence thus far, however, suggests that such a coalition is unlikely to form. Japan, China, and South Korea are accelerating talks on a free-trade agreement (FTA), and negotiations over the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership—a 16-country arrangement that excludes the United States and accounts for some 30 percent of gross world product—are gaining momentum. All told, China has “17 FTAs with 25 countries and regions, and is in talks over 12 new or upgraded FTA deals.” Beijing is also gaining economic leverage abroad through BRI, even as that undertaking has started to experience growing pushback.

In addition, while the Trump administration’s strategy may well cause short-term economic headaches for China, it is unlikely to deal a long-term setback; China presently occupies a commanding position in global supply chains, accounting for nearly 35 percent of clothing exports and over 32 percent of office and telecommunications equipment exports last year. Its GDP, meanwhile, was over three-fifths as large as America’s in 2017, roughly twice as high a proportion as in 2008. China is also expected to account for roughly 35 percent of global growth between 2017 and 2019. In brief, Beijing is unlikely to wither in the face of tariffs. Indeed, Beijing-based economics correspondent Michael Schuman concludes that the Trump administration’s course of unilateral protectionism has only “reinforced the critical importance of [its] quest for greater independence....China is content to go its own way on its own terms.”

The worst-case scenario from Washington’s perspective would be one in which it confronts, without its European and Asian partners and allies, a China whose economy is not only significantly larger but also more resilient. Jeffrey Bader, President Obama’s principal China advisor between 2009 and 2011, made this point powerfully in a recent policy brief:

Americans need to understand that if we go down the road of disengagement from China in pursuit of unbridled competition, it will not be a repetition of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, when the United States was joined by a phalanx of Western and democratic countries determined to join us in isolating the [Soviet Union]....the rest of the world, like us, is deeply entangled with China economically and in other ways. Even those most wary of Beijing, like Japan, India, and Australia, will not risk economic ties with China nor join in a perverse struggle to re-erect the “bamboo curtain,” this time by the West. We will be on our own.

China’s Long-Term Strategic Objectives

In his October 2017 address before the Chinese Communist Party’s 19th Party Congress, President Xi expressed confidence that China would move “closer to center stage” this century—with good cause: in a feat that seemed inconceivable amid post-Cold War Western triumphalism, it has managed to

¹¹ The Chinese international relations scholar Yan Xuetong contends that “the core of competition between China and the United States will be to see who has more high-quality friends.” See “How China Can Defeat America,” *New York Times* (November 21, 2011).

attain the world's second-largest GDP, become the largest trading country, and register numerous other economic accomplishments, all while growing further authoritarian. In America's ongoing immersion in the Middle East's convulsions, the global financial crisis of 2008-09, and increasing political toxicity in Washington, meanwhile, China discerns a US superpower that is strategically adrift and internally divided.

As a great power's strength increases, so, too, it stands to reason, would its conviction that once distant hopes could prove to be reachable goals. Esteemed Sinologists, however, debate the scale of those aspirations. Georgetown University's Oriana Skylar Mastro concludes that China aims to become the Asia-Pacific region's "unchallenged political, economic, and military hegemon." Princeton University's Aaron Friedberg goes further, concluding that China may undertake to "match, [perhaps even] overtake, the United States in terms of overall power and influence." The Hudson Institute's Michael Pillsbury is even more unequivocal, assessing that China "seeks to remake the global hierarchy, with itself as leader."¹² The more strenuously China disavows the pretension to global preeminence, the more vigorously, and naturally, some US observers counter that it does, in fact, maintain that objective—especially as its aggregate national power grows apace: why feel compelled to disclaim with growing vigor and frequency, after all, a supposition that is self-evidently unwarranted?

Despite that reasonable skepticism, the evidence thus far does not suggest that China endeavors to replace the United States as the underwriter of a global order, though its objectives may grow more grandiose in due course. If its leaders assume that the passage of time will inexorably restore a Sinocentric hierarchy, and that they merely need to exhibit patience while weathering the fury of a declining superpower, they are likely to be disappointed. Growing external instability, a grim demographic outlook, a paucity of true partners and allies, deepening security cooperation between its neighbors, and intensifying efforts by the West to limit the reach of its technologies are just a few of the obstacles that are likely to constrain its trajectory. And then, of course, there is the growing velocity of contemporary geopolitics, which, while not obviating the importance of planning, cautions against wedding oneself too rigidly to the sorts of five-year plans in which China takes such pride.¹³ It is important for the United States to appreciate that China's leaders are neither peerless strategic savants nor amateur tactical improvisers; they will likely stumble and adapt, as seen with their recalibration of the BRI's course. Washington stands to be more competitive over the long run if it invests anew in its unique competitive strengths than if it endeavors to replicate China's movements.¹⁴

¹² Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*, reprint ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016): p. 236

¹³ For these reasons, among others, it is unclear that China will overtake the United States as the world's foremost power, even as the margin of the latter's preeminence will likely continue to decline; I elaborate in "[Questioning the Presumption of a US-China Power Transition](#)," *Diplomat* (January 8, 2019).

¹⁴ James Dobbins and I make this point in "[The US can't 'out-China' China](#)," *Hill* (December 30, 2018).