

# Will China replace the U.S. as the world's predominant power?

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**In 2012, I wrote an article in *Atlantisch Perspectief* on U.S. President Barack Obama's second-term foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> How Obama dealt with challenges emerging from China was an important question, in part, because Chinese officials so clearly projected an air of ascendancy in their meetings with their American counterparts while intellectuals in China contemplated the finer points of U.S. declinism theory.**

I was reminded of this 2012 article because in the wake of the COVID-19 global crisis, Chinese spokespersons are again speaking more confidently, with an assertive swagger that broadcasts that China is ready to grasp hold of an enhanced global position. In 2011, Obama's attempts to manage a more forceful China, by toning down U.S. confrontational language, yielded limited benefits.

The Trump administration's response to China's recent uptick in assertiveness has been to engage in a war of words. Additionally, Trump's combative stance with China appears central to his re-election strategy. Thus, from now until November third, we can expect to endure a heated rivalry, with accusations flying between China and the U.S. How should the global system respond? Will states take sides?

Undoubtedly, China wants to take on a great-power mantle, which includes leading a response to a global health crisis, but no matter how ignoble U.S. foreign policy might be over the course of the next few months, is the West really ready for China's guidance and what would we be giving up if the U.S. shed its role as the global system's leader in times of crisis?

## THE CHINA CHALLENGE

In the wake of the U.S.' slow and poor response to the virus and the Trump administration's clear unwillingness to organize an international effort to fight the disease as it has in past epidemics, China sees an opportunity to burnish its image as a world leader.<sup>2</sup> Foreign-policy watchers in the U.S. also fear that the pandemic and the resulting global recession are marking a geopolitical re-ordering that will leave China as the winner. By mid-April this year a host of articles speculated on whether the combination of Trump's lack of interest in global leadership, coupled with China's expansion of influence in the areas where the U.S. was retreating, was ultimately accelerating China's goal to replace the U.S. as the world's predominate power.

From the Chinese point of view, as it watched Trump fight with governors over medical supplies, America is weighed down by systemic weaknesses that make it unable to effectively respond to the pandemic within its own borders. In contrast, China pointed to its dramatic reduction in the number of COVID-19 cases as further evidence of the superiority of one-party rule over democracy. To complement these views, China offered web seminars on best practices, which it gained from tackling the virus, and it



Once in office Obama started with a plan to reduce the American confrontational stance toward China. However, it did not take long for Obama to realize that his policy of accommodation was in fact emboldening Chinese bellicose behavior. Here Obama is pictured with Chinese President Xi Jinping during the G20 summit in Hangzhou in 2016 (photo: plavevski/Shutterstock.com)

airlifted medical supplies including protective equipment, testing kits and ventilators to the worst-hit countries in Europe.

Unwittingly, Trump moved to support China's narrative when, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April, he suspended payment to the World Health Organization (WHO), a United Nations body. In mid-May he escalated his rhetoric by threatening to withdraw U.S. membership from the organization. Trump's argument is that the WHO failed to challenge China's early claims about the low risk of human-to-human transmission. China's response was predictable, it announced it would give another \$30 million to the WHO to fill the gap and support further measures against the virus.<sup>3</sup>

Trump's 2020 campaign strategy of "us against them," which includes blaming the Chinese for the coronavirus in addition to his continued anti-trade and anti-immigrant MAGA (Make America Great Again) rhetoric, is similarly supporting China's official narrative to its own population. The Chinese official state storyline even affected the behavior of Chinese students studying abroad in the United States; many fled the U.S. with the intention to make it back to safe China.

China's state media account is supported by Trump's blame-China rhetoric because, just as Trump is playing on the fears of his domestic base, who perceive themselves as victims of the outside world and even of the post-Cold War world that America built, so too do Chinese spokespersons exploit a sense of victimhood at the hands of "the West," as well as a broad rejection of the Western

ideology that postwar America represents. Thus, Chinese autocrats and the Trump administration draw from the same arguments, use the same bashing-the-other tactics and get the same polarizing results. By March 2020, the FBI's Houston office reported a surge in hate crimes against Asian-Americans, noting that rhetoric had fueled ill will and led some Americans to act out against Asian-in-appearance individuals who were suspected of carrying the COVID-19 virus.

Inside China, the Trump administration's inflammatory language creates opportunities for Beijing to promote its own conspiracy theories about the origins of the virus. For instance, state news websites argue that the Trump administration is waging an all-out campaign to smear China when it contends the novel coronavirus is "Made in China." Chinese state media even made an animated video mocking the U.S. with Lego figures, which it posted on Twitter.<sup>4</sup>

### THE RISE AND FALL OF GREAT POWERS

Scholars in international relations have been predicting for some time that the U.S. will surrender its position as the exceptional power—that state that others look to in a crisis because of its unique and longstanding ability to unite the world around a cause. For example, in 1958, A.F.K. Organski presented the *power transition theory*, which hypothesized that different rates of economic, demographic and military growth lead to the rise and fall of states that are able to create the norms and behavior of the international system as a whole.<sup>5</sup> Organski argued that rising challengers, like China, are motivated to overturn the existing order and replace it with one more advantageous to their own interests. George Modelski, in 1987, linked economic supremacy to a nation-state's ability to be a "world leader," which is a state able to legitimately establish patterns of behavior that other states follow.<sup>6</sup> In Modelski's *long cycle theory*, a de-concentration of power occurs when the world leader, in this case the U.S., loses influence and legitimacy, which leads to a new struggle for supremacy by the challenging power.

However, the most well-known contribution to the American declinism narrative is Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*.<sup>7</sup> Kennedy, like other hegemonic-theory scholars, focuses on long-term economic trends, in particular the fact that global growth rates are uneven over time, which eventually results in rising states challenging declining great powers. Kennedy's description of the interlocking economic and military strengths necessary for a state to achieve and preserve an ability to influence the world attracts the interest of many who long for America's decline.<sup>8</sup> Although Kennedy published



Fiery Cross Reef is one of the disputed Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. China laid claim on the island by illegally building a large military base (photo: Flickr/Loco Steve)

in 1987, before the end of the Cold War and certainly before China's economic boom, he was prescient in predicting China's rise in power.

In fact, Chinese officials have been gearing up for this challenge since 2006, after it became the second-largest economy in the world. Chinese ambitions took on added vim after the 2008 financial crisis, when the U.S. became the world's largest debtor and China became a key holder of U.S. debt. Xi Jinping's becoming the secretary-general of the Communist Party in 2012 further added to China's growing global assertiveness. For instance, upon taking office, Xi moved quickly to put his imprimatur on the People's Liberation Army (PLA) by emphasizing the importance of fighting and winning battles.<sup>9</sup>

A fourth factor in China's assertive stance had to do with Obama's diplomatic style. Unlike presidential candidates before and after him, who used tough talk on China to appeal to voters, Obama tried to avoid belligerent language in relation to China in his first campaign. Once in office, in a move similar to his ambitious plan to reduce the antagonisms between the U.S. and the Muslim world, Obama started with a plan to reduce the American confrontational stance toward China.

However, it did not take long for Obama to realize that his policy of accommodation was in fact *emboldening* Chinese bellicose behavior, in particular, in the South China Sea. By 2011, Obama had changed course. He announced a rebalancing of U.S. naval forces, with 60 percent residing in the Pacific rather than the previous 50 percent (with the other 50 percent in the Atlantic), that he would rotate 2,500 marines through bases in northern and western Australia and that he would station U.S. combat ships in Singapore.

#### A WORLD MADE IN CHINA'S IMAGE

While China certainly yearns for a shift in global power structures and to be that country that states look to in a crisis, from a number of perspectives China's structural components are not as desirable as the U.S.' tried and tested ones, which were built after the Second World War. Even in those areas where China has a strategic advantage, in for example, its "mask diplomacy" (because it is the world's largest producer of medical equipment), China ultimately fails. Contrary to what its congratulatory state media broadcast about Chinese generosity, China actually sent faulty test kits and profited handsomely from its medical equipment sales.





From a global supply-partner perspective, the sharp quarantine controls in China, which locked down factories that produce a large share of the world's supply of antibiotics, called into question the dependence of vital products on one state-owned, authoritarian system. (photo: I viewfinder/Shutterstock.com)

From a trade-partner perspective, China's continued theft of intellectual property calls into question its trustworthiness. Even Trump's tariffs, which have been harmful to American farmers and consumers, did not produce concessions or put a stop to China's undesirable habits as a trade partner. From a global supply-partner perspective, the sharp quarantine controls in China, which locked down factories that produce a large share of the world's supply of antibiotics, called into question the dependence of vital products on one state-owned, authoritarian system. From a technology-partner perspective, worries about Chinese secrecy during the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak cast into doubt any partnerships with Chinese tech giant Huawei to help build 5G networks in European countries.

Since both 5G networks and the supply of irreplaceable drugs could be rated as national-security threats, the fact that China has in the past used its trade advantages to bully other countries during political disputes is a further cause of concern. For example, in 2010 China broke trade relations with Norway, after Liu Xiaobo, a Chinese human rights advocate, won the Nobel peace prize. It took six years before China and Norway announced that they would normalize their relations. In another case, China denied the export of rare earths to Japan in 2010 because of a dispute over the detention of a Chinese fishing trawler that had collided with two Japanese coast

guard vessels. Just as China is an essential supplier of antibiotics, it is the source of over 90 percent of the world's supply of rare earth minerals, which are used in a wide range of manufactured goods, from cars to missile-guidance motors.

From a financial perspective, recent revelations that Chinese companies are seeking investments from sovereign-wealth funds and U.S. banks through fabricating sales figures calls into question China's opaque corporate governance system. As one fraud investigator put it, "China is to stock fraud what Silicon Valley is to technology."<sup>10</sup> The COVID-19 crisis has also emphasized that the dollar is still the preferred currency for countries to hold in their central-bank vaults.

Perhaps the prospect that China would become the underwriter of a stable global system—the guarantor of collective security within the UN Security Council—is the least viable. Not only does China not have the global footprint, with one overseas base in Djibouti compared to the United States' 800, it expresses no willingness to intervene to save the lives of others. Add to this, that its own human rights abuses are many and its belligerent behavior in the South China Sea continues unabated. For example, while it promoted its COVID-19 credentials in April of this year, a Chinese ship rammed and sank a Vietnamese fishing boat in waters claimed by Vietnam.

China's response to Vietnam's official protest was to announce that the saved crew had confessed to illegally entering Chinese waters.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, China's argument that its response to the virus was swift and superior may also backfire, since most Western capitals have come to doubt China's official numbers and worry about China's "truth management." In March, Josep Borrell, the EU's foreign-policy chief, commented on the "global battle of narratives" and China's aggressive disinformation tactics and equally assertive softpower campaign. Borrell said that Europe "must be aware there is a geo-political component including a struggle for influence through spinning and the 'politics of generosity.'"<sup>12</sup>

### YOU CAN'T ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU WANT

Rather than enhance China's influence in the world, COVID-19 may ultimately reduce its power on the world stage. Countries in Europe that were less willing to be openly critical, in part for fear of retribution or of losing business, have begun to express concern over Beijing's narrative of its handling of the crisis and have even begun to reduce their dependence on Chinese manufactured goods and supply chains and to distance themselves from further entanglement in China's more affordable and much wanted high-tech sector, including 5G technologies. In an age when a virus can stall economies, overwhelm excellent health systems and kill tens of thousands of their citizens, leaders in Western Europe have come to realize that they cannot depend on an autocratic China. Perhaps after COVID-19, West European governments will reverse their timidity in response to Chinese domestic human rights abuses and start to act in concert—beginning with a reminder that China signed the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It could turn out that China's reading of hegemonic-theory scholars and, in particular Kennedy's analysis of the rise and fall of great powers, is as wrong as Osama Bin Laden's (who wanted to bait the U.S. into exhaustion). Without cherry-picking arguments, a wholistic view of Kennedy's line of reasoning includes an observation that the United States is an *atypical* power that could reinvigorate itself through the quality of its future choices.

One clear choice that Kennedy stressed was essential to America's continued prominence was to avoid lapsing into protectionism or isolationism. Hopefully, someone in Trump's administration will be able to persuade the president that protectionism and isolationism will undermine America's standing in the world and American interests as well.



Xi Jinping's becoming the secretary-general of the Communist Party in 2012 further added to China's growing global assertiveness. Xi moved quickly to put his imprimatur on the People's Liberation Army (PLA) by emphasizing the importance of fighting and winning battles (photo: Twinstephoto/Shutterstock.com)

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Would you like to react?

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