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China's Strategy for Asia: Maximize Power, Replace America

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China's primary strategic goal in contemporary times has been the accumulation of "comprehensive national power." This pursuit of power in all its dimensions—economic, military, technological and diplomatic—is driven by the conviction that China, a great civilization undone by the hostility of others, could never attain its destiny unless it amassed the power necessary to ward off the hostility of those opposed to this quest.

This vision of strengthening the Chinese state while recovering China's centrality in international politics—both objectives requiring the accumulation of "comprehensive national power"—suggests that the aims of Beijing's grand strategy both implicate and transcend the United States' and China's other Asian rivals, to replace U.S. primacy in Asia writ large. For China, which is simultaneously an ancient civilization and a modern polity, grand strategic objectives are not simply about desirable rank orderings in international politics but rather about fundamental conceptions of order.

Because the acquisition of comprehensive national power is meant to both increase the Chinese state's control over its society and maximize the country's overall capabilities relative to its foreign competitors, Beijing has consistently pursued four specific operational aims since the revolution—though the instruments used to achieve these ends have varied over time.

China's Four Strategic Goals

- Maintain Internal Order

The first and most important aim pursued by China's leaders since the founding of the modern Chinese state has been the preservation of internal order and the domination of the Chinese Communist Party.

- Sustain High Economic Growth

The goal of ensuring continued and unchallenged Communist rule leads to the second operational aspiration: sustaining the high levels of economic growth necessary to preserve social order.

- Pacify the Periphery

The external advantages arising from China's high growth rates thus far have strengthened its capacity to achieve the third operational aim deriving from its quest for comprehensive national power: the pacification of its extended geographic periphery. Beijing has sought to accomplish this by deepening economic ties with its Asian neighbors to "reduce regional anxieties" about China's rise; making common cause with some states, such as Russia, that have reasons to resist joining the larger balancing against China now under way in Asia; embarking on a concerted modernization of the PLA; and renewing older efforts to delegitimize the U.S. alliance system in Asia.

- Cement International Status

The CCP's desire to preserve domestic control is enhanced by the final element of the strategic goal of maximizing comprehensive national power: enhancing China's status as a central actor in the international system.

The fundamental conclusion for the United States, therefore, is that China does not see its interests served by becoming just another "trading state," no matter how constructive an outcome

that might be for resolving the larger tensions between its economic and geopolitical strategies. Instead, China will continue along the path to becoming a conventional great power with the full panoply of political and military capabilities, all oriented toward realizing the goal of recovering from the United States the primacy it once enjoyed in Asia as a prelude to exerting global influence in the future.

II. Xi Jinping as Dominating Leader

Xi Jinping has fundamentally changed the systems of Chinese governance. Under the preceding model, previous generations of Chinese leaders since Deng Xiaoping created a structure that embedded leadership and decision-making within a collective system of checks and balances that spanned a variety of bureaucratic institutions and included a substantial number of party elites. These bureaucratic procedures and prerogatives no longer function as before. Xi has introduced a new system by limiting collective leadership and marginalizing the traditional institutions of governance, relying instead on a small coterie of close advisors and an array of parallel structures to control policymaking. With respect to foreign policy, Xi has reduced the role of the State Council, Foreign Ministry and military in important decisions, giving him greater freedom from governmental machinery and the political and bureaucratic opponents that can influence Chinese foreign policy.

Because of Xi's unprecedented power and influence, Chinese policy will increasingly be determined by his background and biases—and therefore will be significantly more unpredictable. The son of a revolutionary who fought alongside Mao, Xi reportedly sees himself and his fellow “princelings” as tasked with rescuing and reviving the Communist Party, to which he is dedicated. His dedication to the Party shapes his views on what he perceives as two of the largest threats to its longevity: corruption and liberalism.

Xi's Foreign Policy

What sets Xi's foreign policy apart the most is his willingness to use every instrument of statecraft, from military assets to geoeconomic intimidation, as well as explicit economic rewards, to pursue his various geopolitical objectives. In general, Xi's policy has been characterized by bullying over territorial issues and selective beneficence on economic matters, with the looming application of geoeconomic coercion ever present. A third of [my new book on geoeconomics](#) analyzes China's use of economic instruments for geopolitical purposes.

This approach has been clearest in China's relations with Southeast Asian states, many of which are embroiled in a simmering territorial dispute with Beijing over the South China Sea. Beijing's hardening position on these territorial disputes has been accompanied by generous investment and trade packages to Southeast Asian states, and these too appear to be coordinated centrally to geopolitical ends.

A mixture of hard and soft policies has likewise characterized China's relations with India. During Xi's first visit to India, Chinese troops launched one of their largest incursions ever into disputed territory with India. China has sought to use the border to keep India off balance and reduce its maritime military investments, which is at least one reason Beijing has been unwilling to [delineate the Line of Actual Control \(LAC\)](#) despite Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's public request that the two countries do so.

With respect to Japan, China has pursued a tough and nationalistic policy. Under Xi, China has dramatically escalated its territorial dispute with Japan through its declaration of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea.

Aside from developing stronger ties with other states, an important element of Xi's multifaceted strategy has been to energetically create and participate in multilateral institutions. Some of these, such as AIIB, will be useful for dispensing geoeconomically oriented loans to neighbors. The misguided refusal of the United States to participate in the AIIB's creation, and Washington's failed attempt to persuade friends and allies not to join, denied the United States an opportunity to influence the bank's rules, development trajectory and China's potential use of the bank as a geopolitical instrument.

Diplomacy After the Downturn

Economic growth and nationalism have for decades been the two founts of legitimacy for the Communist Party, and as the former wanes, Xi will likely rely increasingly on the latter. As a powerful but exposed leader, Xi will tap into this potent nationalist vein through foreign policy, burnishing his nationalist credentials and securing his domestic position from elite and popular criticism, all while pursuing various Chinese national interests.

In the future, Xi could become more hostile to the West, using it as a foil to boost his approval ratings the way Putin has in Russia. Already, major Chinese newspapers are running articles blaming the country's economic slump on efforts undertaken by insidious "foreign forces" that seek to sabotage the country's rise.

On territorial matters, Xi will be unwilling or unable to make concessions that could harm his domestic position, and may even seek to escalate territorial disputes against Japan or South China Sea claimants as a way of redirecting domestic attention away from the economic situation and burnishing his nationalist record.

Globally, in order to demonstrate at home that China is taken seriously abroad, Xi will maintain a proactive and assertive Chinese foreign policy that involves institution-building and occasional provocation, while remaining firm in the face of external pressure on the South and East China Seas, human rights, conditions in Tibet and Xinjiang, and diplomatic visits by the Dalai Lama.

Finally, Xi's resistance to Western culture and values may intensify. Because China's economy is now slowing, Xi's fear of political instability may push him to adopt even sterner measures, and new violations of human rights and the emerging challenges that Western NGOs and businesses face will likely cause renewed friction in China's relationships with the West.

China's Challenge to U.S. Vital National Interests

Although Washington seeks a cooperative relationship with Beijing on nonproliferation, energy security and the international economy and environment, the primary U.S. preoccupation regarding American vital national interests should be a rising China's systematic effort to fundamentally alter the balance of power in Asia, diminish the vitality of the U.S.-Asian alliance system, and ultimately displace the United States as the Asian leader. As noted earlier, Beijing seeks to achieve these goals:

- replace the United States as the primary power in Asia;

- weaken the U.S. alliance system in Asia;
- undermine the confidence of Asian nations in U.S. credibility, reliability, and staying power;
- use China's economic power to pull Asian nations closer to PRC geopolitical policy preferences;
- increase PRC military capability to strengthen deterrence against U.S. military intervention in the region;
- cast doubt on the U.S. economic model;
- ensure U.S. democratic values do not diminish the CCP's hold on domestic power; and
- avoid a major confrontation with the United States in the next decade.

III. U.S. Grand Strategy and Policies Toward China

The principal task that confronts U.S. grand strategy today is adapting to the fundamental challenge posed by China's continuing rise and its grand strategy. China's integration into the world system, the prevailing U.S. approach toward China, has undoubtedly contributed to China's rise as a future rival to American power. None of the alternatives usually discussed in the debates in Washington and elsewhere about how to respond to China's growing strength satisfy the objective of preserving American primacy for yet another "long cycle" in international politics.

Accordingly, the United States should substantially modify its grand strategy toward China—one that at its core would replace the goal of concentrating on integrating Beijing into the international system with that of consciously balancing its rise—as a means of protecting simultaneously the security of the United States and its allies, the U.S. position at the apex of the global hierarchy, and the strength of the liberal international order, which is owed ultimately to the robustness of American relative power.

To accomplish this renewed U.S. grand strategy toward China, Washington should implement the following policies:

1. Vitalize the U.S. Economy

Nothing would better promote the United States' strategic future and grand strategy toward China than strong economic growth in the United States. This must be the first priority of the president and the new Congress.

2. Expand Asian Trade Networks

The United States should construct a new set of trading relationships in Asia that exclude China, fashion effective policies to deal with China's pervasive use of geoeconomic tools in Asia and beyond, and, in partnership with U.S. allies and like-minded partners, create a new technology-control mechanism vis-à-vis China. TPP is an important step in this direction, and support for the agreement from Congress would not only demonstrate U.S. staying power but also signal to China and our allies the depth of the long-term American commitment to the region's prosperity.

3. Strengthen the U.S. Military

The United States should invest in U.S. defense capabilities and capacity to enable the United States to defeat China's emerging antiaccess capabilities and permit successful U.S. power projection even against concerted opposition from Beijing.

4. Implement Effective Cyber Policies

For the past decade, the United States has tolerated incessant cyberattacks by China on the U.S. government, critical infrastructure and businesses. Virtually nothing has been done to stop this cyber assault, and the "name and shame" approach toward China has clearly failed. Thus, the U.S. should impose costs on China that are in excess of the benefits it receives from its violations in cyberspace.

5. Reinforce Indo-Pacific Partnerships

The United States should reinforce a new set of trusted strategic relationships and partnerships throughout the Indo-Pacific region that include traditional U.S. alliances but go beyond them, pursuing as an explicit policy the objectives of both strengthening Asian states' ability to cope with China independently and building new forms of intra-Asian strategic cooperation that do not always involve, but will be systematically supported by, the United States.

6. Energize High-Level Diplomacy with Beijing

The United States should energize high-level diplomacy with China to attempt to mitigate the inherently profound tensions as the two nations pursue mutually incompatible grand strategies and to reassure U.S. allies and friends in Asia and beyond that its objective is to avoid a confrontation with China.

IV. Conclusion

No U.S. grand strategy toward China can succeed without the continuous involvement and leadership of the President. Despite turmoil in the Middle East and tensions with Russia, the President should concentrate on managing the greatest strategic challenge to the United States in the coming decades—the rise of Chinese power. His or her hands should be continually seen to be on the wheel of U.S. grand strategy toward China, and he or she should hold face-to-face meetings on the subject much more frequently with Asia's leaders and European Union heads of government. Occasional forty-five minute bilateral talks with his or her Asian counterparts at the margins of international meetings are insufficient to the task.

The same is true of Congress, which is an indispensable element in dealing with Chinese power over the long term. Partisan divides and the press of daily events will not excuse Congress if it largely ignores the effects of China's rise on U.S. interests. The congressional role in sustaining a successful U.S. grand strategy toward China is manifested primarily in three areas: supporting the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) free-trade agreement, reforming and providing the defense budgets necessary to maintain U.S. power projection and a credible Asian alliance system, and continuously holding U.S. administrations accountable for the implementation of their response to the rise of Chinese power.

The profound test that the rise of Chinese power represents for the United States is likely to last for decades. It is unrealistic to imagine that China's grand strategy toward the United States will evolve in a way—at least in the next ten years—that accepts American power and influence as linchpins of Asian peace and security, rather than seeks to systematically diminish them. Thus,

the central question concerning the future of Asia is whether the United States will have the political will; the geoeconomic, military, and diplomatic capabilities; and, crucially, the right grand strategy to deal with China to protect vital U.S. national interests.