What Does America Want From China?

Subtitle
Debating Washington's Strategy—and the Endgame of Competition

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THE BIDEN PLAN

Rush Doshi

In "No Substitute for Victory" (May/June 2024), Matt Pottinger and Mike Gallagher raise important concerns about the Biden administration's China policy. But their analysis misses the mark. Their review of key episodes in the administration's China policy is inaccurate, and they propose steps that the administration is already taking. But above all, they make a bad bet: they contend that the United States should forget about managing competition, embrace confrontation without limits, and then wait for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to collapse. This approach risks runaway escalation and could force a moment of reckoning before the United States has taken the very steps the authors recommend to strengthen its defense industrial base and improve its competitive position. Such a strategy would also mean losing support from U.S. allies and partners, who would see it as irresponsible.

The authors argue that their approach will work against China because it worked against the Soviet Union. But the Biden administration recognizes that this contest is different from that one. Its strategy, most recently articulated by National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan in a speech this past January, is founded on realistic assumptions about the capacity of the United States to shape China's political system. It focuses not on the kind of bilateral relationship Washington wants with Beijing nor on the kind of government Americans want China to have

but on straightforward and long-standing U.S. objectives: keeping the Indo-Pacific free from hegemony, sustaining American economic and technological leadership, and supporting regional democracies. It seeks to revitalize the sources of American strength by investing at home and aligning with allies and partners abroad. From that foundation, the United States can compete intensely by blunting Chinese activities that undermine U.S. interests and building a coalition of forces that will help the United States secure its priorities—all while managing the risks of escalation.

A BAD BET

One can share many of Pottinger and Gallagher's assumptions and yet reach different conclusions on overall strategy. The Biden administration's National Security Strategy recognizes China as the only state with the intent to reshape the international order and the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do so. The administration takes seriously China's efforts to surpass the United States in technology, increase the world's dependence on China's supply chains, ramp up regional military operations, and align more closely with Iran, North Korea, and Russia.

But the administration does not share the authors' assumption that the contest with China can end as decisively and neatly as the Cold War did. Although Pottinger and Gallagher are careful not to call for forceful regime change, they define victory as "a China that is able to chart its own course free from communist dictatorship." A China that resembles Taiwan politically is "the only workable destination," they write.

But betting on a great power's collapse or liberalization is unwise. Despite its challenges, China is the first U.S. competitor in a century to surpass 60 percent of U.S. GDP. The country boasts considerably greater industrial and technological strength than the Soviet Union did and is deeply enmeshed in the global economy. It cannot be wished away.

Ironically, the authors resurrect the end goal of the engagement era: a more liberal China. They hope that this time, a vague toughness will succeed where commercial and people-to-people ties fell short. But if engagement risked complacency, their approach risks escalation. An explicit policy of seeking the end of CCP rule would turn the U.S.-Chinese rivalry into an existential one for China's leadership. If Beijing concluded that the United States sought total victory, it would have little reason to exercise restraint.

American objectives do not require China's political transformation, and there is no guarantee that the end of communist rule would produce a more restrained China. The end of communist Russia, after all, eventually gave way to Putin's Russia.

DIPLOMACY, NOT CAPITULATION

Because they are betting on China's collapse, the authors conclude that "the United States shouldn't manage the competition with China; it should win it." But the notion that two nuclear-armed strategic competitors should not try to manage their rivalry is unusual even among today's China hawks and was uncommon in the days of U.S. diplomat George Kennan and U.S. President Ronald Reagan that the authors praise.

That is because efforts to manage competition make the United States more competitive. Such actions show the American public and U.S. allies and partners that the United States is a responsible actor and that they can confidently buy into Washington's strategy. Excessively confrontational positions, in contrast, leave the United States standing alone with fewer tools. Beijing understands that, which is why it always tries to blame tensions on Washington. Pottinger and Gallagher's approach would play into Beijing's designs.

Managing the competition is unlikely to achieve the kind of strategic reassurance with China that resolves fundamental disagreements. But Washington should have greater confidence in what can be called "tactical reassurance" that addresses specific issues. Better communication about what Washington is doing—and not doing—on issues ranging from technology to Taiwan can discourage dangerously fatalistic thinking from a paranoid great power whose dark view of the United States could get even darker. Making clear that Washington's goals are not limitless but tied to specific interests reduces the risk of runaway escalation. That requires face-to-face meetings so that misperceptions can be ironed out quickly, competitive steps by the United States can be explained directly, and both sides can find off-ramps. Far from capitulation, this is basic diplomacy. It complements intense competition by making it less risky and more sustainable. Pottinger and Gallagher argue that any such efforts should be taken from a strong U.S. position and should be a process, not an end goal. They are right. But that, in fact, describes the very approach that the Biden administration is taking.

A TIME TO REBUILD

When Joe Biden became president, Beijing was convinced that the United States was in decline. During the Trump administration, Chinese President Xi Jinping unveiled a phrase that encapsulated Beijing's growing confidence in this trend: the world was undergoing "great changes unseen in a century." Xi saw President Donald Trump's alienation of American allies and partners, erratic handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, and disregard of democratic norms as proof that "the East is rising and the West is falling." Beijing did not see Trump as tough but as unpredictable and transactional. He was willing to compromise on autonomy in Hong Kong, human rights in Xinjiang, and even his own technology and tariff policies in exchange for concessions that would help him electorally, such as Chinese agricultural and energy purchases in U.S. states important to Trump's political standing. Beijing did not see this as strength.

When the Biden team entered office, they did not rush into diplomacy with Beijing, as the prior administration had done. They instead took a step back, reduced high-level meetings, and paused many dialogues that had not achieved results. With bipartisan support, they focused on replenishing American strengths. At home, the administration passed landmark legislation on pandemic recovery, infrastructure, semiconductors, and clean energy. That catalyzed $3.5 trillion in new public and private investment and propelled a post-COVID recovery with the highest growth, lowest inflation, and lowest unemployment of nearly any developed economy. Meanwhile, China's economy slowed, and its population shrank. Economists' predictions about when China would overtake the United States in nominal GDP went from years to decades.

Abroad, the administration brought U.S. allies and partners closer together through AUKUS, the trilateral security pact among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, and the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), which comprises Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. It negotiated agreements to expand U.S. military access in Australia, Japan, Papua New Guinea, and the Philippines. And it upgraded ties with India, Indonesia, and Vietnam; held unprecedented summits with ASEAN and Pacific Island leaders in Washington; and convened trilateral summits: one with Japan and the Philippines and another with Japan and South Korea. These efforts demonstrated that American decline was not as imminent as Beijing had hoped. From that position, the United States intensified diplomacy with China not as an end but as a means to achieve U.S. interests and mitigate the risk of escalatory spirals.

The administration achieved real gains. When Biden and Xi met in California last fall, they restored and even expanded some military ties to reduce conflict risk. Beijing took steps to reduce the flow of fentanyl precursors to the United States, going beyond its deal with the Trump administration.

Pottinger and Gallagher imply that diplomacy with China has meant scaling back tougher U.S. policies. On the contrary, the administration took more competitive steps while intensifying diplomacy. Over the last year, the administration upgraded semiconductor export controls on China, established the first-ever screening protocols on outbound investment to China, prohibited transfers of U.S. personal data to China, and signed legislation forcing China's ByteDance to divest from TikTok. The White House launched an investigation into the security risks of Chinese-made electric vehicles, levied new tariffs in strategic sectors and called for them in steel and shipbuilding, and put more of China's companies on export control lists than the Trump administration did. The administration also provided billions in new security assistance to Taiwan, including by providing materiel directly from U.S. stockpiles for the first time.

Despite this track record, Pottinger and Gallagher argue that in the interest of facilitating diplomacy, the Biden administration has been "downplaying affronts by Beijing." They claim the administration planned to let a Chinese spy balloon overfly the United States without notifying the public. But the administration immediately limited the balloon's ability to surveil sensitive sites and made plans to shoot it down safely while maximizing opportunities to collect information about the technology and what China was doing with it. The authors claim the Biden administration minimized press reports about China's pursuit of a base in Cuba. But in fact, the administration indicated that details were murky and revealed that it had been carrying out a whole-of-government strategy to counter China's overseas bases, including in Cuba, which it launched only weeks after Biden's inauguration. Finally, the authors imply that the administration has not firmly defended American values in its competition with China. But Biden has repeatedly framed the competition as one between democracy and autocracy, has plainly stated that China is a dictatorship, and has accused China of genocide in Xinjiang.

COMMON SENSE, COMMON GROUND

The authors rightly assume that China is preparing for a catastrophic conflict over Taiwan. Their concerns about the U.S. defense industrial base, shipbuilding delays, and the retirement of older vessels and aircraft are widely shared. Many steps they propose are underway. These include expanding the U.S. military's footprint in the Indo-Pacific, investing in unmanned or containerized weapons systems and kits that can convert "dumb bombs" into guided munitions, hardening key military facilities, and pre-positioning supplies.

But the authors' proposal for a $20 billion annual deterrence fund that would "surge and disperse sufficient combat power in Asia" for five years is genuinely novel. It is also more achievable than their call to effectively double the defense budget. A deterrence fund could complement the Biden administration's new Replicator Initiative, which seeks to field thousands of unmanned autonomous systems within two years. It could also turbocharge U.S. investments in asymmetric capabilities, such as long-range missiles and advanced mines.

Pottinger and Gallagher also raise concerns about China's efforts to dominate new technologies, exploit U.S. dependencies, and export its excess industrial capacity to put competitors out of business. Yet here again, the Biden administration has already taken many of the steps they propose: new tariffs, coordination with allies and partners on economic and technological issues, investment restrictions, and export controls. Other steps the authors propose, such as preventing U.S. funds from enabling investment in blacklisted Chinese companies, are sound and should find bipartisan support. So, too, is the authors' call for Washington to recruit Americans, particularly Asia hands and technologists, into government and to make sure that Americans are informed about what's at stake in the competition with China.

Pottinger and Gallagher provide an important service to the China policy debate by presenting a good-faith critique of the current approach. But what is most useful about their argument is not the areas of difference with the Biden administration but the areas of overlap. U.S. policy toward China will need bipartisan foundations to succeed. Their essay shows that regardless of where one starts in the China debate, at the moment, most policymakers are arriving at a similar set of common-sense policies.

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THE PERILS OF ESTRANGEMENT

Jessica Chen Weiss and James B. Steinberg

The United States faces a major challenge in managing its relations with China, the world's second-largest economy and military power. The Chinese government does not share the United States' commitment to liberal democracy, is at odds with many of the United States' key international partners, and pursues economic policies that harm American workers and companies. Meeting that challenge requires a nuanced understanding of the forces driving

China's external policies and a clear-eyed view of the sources of U.S. strength. The path forward suggested by Pottinger and Gallagher reflects neither. Instead, they offer an illusory appeal to victory, one that will harm the cause of freedom in China, damage Washington's relations with key U.S. allies, and risk a dangerous confrontation reminiscent of the worst days of the Cold War—a Cold War they enthusiastically embrace.

We share Pottinger and Gallagher's hope that the Chinese people will one day enjoy greater freedoms and civil liberties. But history has shown that U.S. efforts to bring about change through pressure are as likely to consolidate authoritarian rule as to undermine it. The authors say they are not calling for "forcible regime change, subversion, or war," because they know that such extreme efforts carry intolerable risks. But their proposed tactics, if taken up by Washington, would ensure the most undesirable outcome: a Chinese leadership unwilling to cooperate on shared concerns but domestically strengthened by appeals to nationalist sentiments in the face of a hostile adversary. Worse yet, the aggressive policies the authors prescribe would alienate important U.S. partners that have no interest in an "us versus them" approach.

Pottinger and Gallagher try to minimize the extraordinary risks their recommendations present by characterizing them as nothing more than "greater friction," which would eventually compel Beijing to simply "give up." What gives them such confidence that China's nuclear-armed leaders would go down without a fight? This is wishful thinking, not strategy. They castigate the Biden administration's approach as a throwback to détente, which the United States used to manage risk with the Soviet Union during the 1970s, but theirs is a revival of the "rollback" of the 1950s, which pushed the rival superpowers to the precipice of nuclear Armageddon.

The Cold War is a chilling reminder of the perils of unconstrained rivalry. It is also at odds with what the American public wants. According to a 2023 survey commissioned by the nonprofits National Security Action and Foreign Policy for America, a bipartisan majority of voters—87 percent of Democrats and 68 percent of Republicans—believe that U.S. leaders should focus more on working to avoid a military conflict than preparing for one. Only 21 percent regard China as an "enemy"; 76 percent view it as a "competitor."

Chinese leader Xi Jinping's tightening grip at home and China's economic and military coercion abroad are cause for deep concern. Openly adopting a confrontational Cold War posture toward Beijing would only reinforce the Chinese leadership's embrace of tough, authoritarian policies designed to show resolve and insulate China from U.S. pressure. When China's efforts undermine the interests of the United States and its partners, Washington must take firm, measured steps to meet those specific challenges. But U.S. policymakers should keep in mind that China's aggressive tactics are self-undermining, dimming China's economic vitality and damaging its international appeal. Washington needs to play a long game, one that favors its natural strengths.

The economic headwinds that China is now encountering, combined with efforts by the United States to strengthen its economic and technological competitiveness, have created a window for the two countries to stabilize their relationship, which had veered dangerously close to

conflict. It is in the interest of both Beijing and Washington to reduce the risk of war and cooperate on key issues of mutual concern, such as climate change, public health, and the management of potentially destabilizing new technologies. Xi's summit with Biden in California last fall was a step in the right direction, resulting in efforts to curb China's fentanyl-related exports and the restoration of military-to-military communications to reduce the risk of an unintended crisis.

Even when direct diplomacy fails to resolve key issues, Washington's openness to engage demonstrates to the world that the United States is acting responsibly. Moreover, such engagements provide opportunities to press the Chinese government to change its harmful policies, including support for Russia's war in Ukraine and other threatening actions.

Even as the United States works to counter Chinese cyberattacks, information operations, and unfair economic practices, it should also welcome Chinese tourists, businesspeople, and students. The policies Pottinger and Gallagher advocate would only deepen the estrangement between Americans and the Chinese people. If the authors mean what they say about supporting the Chinese people, they must recognize the importance of these societal ties, especially if official relations remain tense.

Pottinger and Gallagher's nostalgia for the Cold War and their call for a new generation of cold warriors could be issued only by those who have no memory of how dangerous that war often was.

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A POSSIBLE PARTNER

Paul Heer

Pottinger and Gallagher offer the wrong diagnosis of the challenge that China poses to the United States and thus the wrong prescriptions for dealing with that challenge. The diagnosis is wrong because it greatly overstates the nature of China's strategy and the scope of its ambitions. The authors assert that "Beijing is pursuing a raft of global initiatives designed to disintegrate the West and usher in an antidemocratic order." Beijing is indeed pursuing a raft of global initiatives to maximize China's power, influence, and wealth relative to the United States—and is doing so ruthlessly and relentlessly. But its goals fall well short of hastening the disintegration of the West or establishing an antidemocratic order. CCP leaders are focused on winning hearts and minds in a multipolar world, especially outside the West, and they recognize that trying to establish Chinese global hegemony and impose their own system on the rest of the world would be counterproductive to that goal. They also recognize that it would be destabilizing, prohibitively expensive, and probably unachievable and unsustainable.

It is likewise wrong for Pottinger and Gallagher to assert that Chinese leader Xi Jinping has a "policy of fostering global chaos" and that CCP leaders believe "they can destabilize the world with impunity." On the contrary, one of Beijing's overriding objectives during the past several decades has been to seek a stable external environment that would allow the CCP to focus on its myriad domestic problems and priorities. The authors quote a 2021 speech by Xi, in which he says that the world is in "chaos" and that "this trend appears likely to continue," and they juxtapose this with Xi concluding that "the times and trends are on our side" and "the opportunities outweigh the challenges" for China. But it takes a highly selective reading of Xi's speech to extrapolate that he is reveling in global chaos. The broader context, and additional statements by Xi and other CCP leaders, make it clear that Beijing sees overall trends as favoring China not because of global disorder but in spite of it.

Pottinger and Gallagher also cite a remark Xi made to Russian President Vladimir Putin in March 2023: "Right now, there are changes, the likes of which we haven't seen for 100 years. And we are the ones driving these changes together." Although this is now routinely quoted in media reports as evidence of Xi and Putin's malign agenda, there is a "game of telephone" dynamic at work: the quote is an English translation of a Russian translation of an impromptu remark Xi made in Chinese. Much has been made of the remark, but it seems more like an offhand comment, or even a garbled translation, than a declaration of a grand scheme. Xi almost certainly did not intend to say what the translation attributed to him, because it is inconsistent with Beijing's long-standing narrative. The broader context and other speeches and documents issued by Xi and various Chinese officials make it clear that Beijing views many of these global "changes" as having been thrust upon China by historical forces and players, and as posing dangers and risks, as well as opportunities. It is more likely that Xi and Putin think they are trying to drive a response to those changes.

Pottinger and Gallagher note that "Xi and his inner circle see themselves as fighting an existential ideological campaign against the West." Of course they do, partly because Washington has also made it clear that it believes itself to be in a global contest between democracy and autocracy. Gallagher reinforced this view in a February 2023 hearing before the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party when he described the U.S.-Chinese competition as "an existential struggle over what life will look like in the 21st century." Similarly, although the authors quote Xi asserting in 2014 that China "must achieve total victory," they also declare that there is "no substitute for victory" for the United States.

Based on their diagnosis of China as an existential and incorrigible threat, Pottinger and Gallagher offer a package of prescriptions to gird for an inevitable cold war with China. They advocate enhancing U.S. military deterrence, eroding China's economic leverage, and recruiting a "broader coalition," both inside and outside the United States, to confront Beijing. There are a number of problems with this agenda, including its reliance on funding that may not materialize and the fact that extensive economic decoupling from China would be costly for the United States. It is also worth noting that the strategy aspires to "restore U.S. primacy in Asia," an improbably ambitious aim.

Moreover, many U.S. allies and partners are unlikely to adopt the goal of regime change in China that is inherent in Pottinger and Gallagher's argument. The authors avow that they are not advocating "forcible regime change" or "subversion." But their definition of victory includes "the Chinese people . . . find[ing] inspiration to explore new models of development and governance." This echoes a speech that Pottinger delivered in May 2020, as deputy national security adviser in the Trump administration, when he speculated "whether China today would benefit from a little less nationalism and a little more populism." He added, "When a privileged few grow too remote and self-interested, populism is what pulls them back or pitches them overboard. It has a kinetic energy." Not surprisingly, this was widely viewed at the time by many China specialists—and probably CCP leaders, as well—as encouraging the Chinese people to overthrow their government. The same audiences will rightly interpret Pottinger and Gallagher's article the same way.

In outlining their prescriptions, the authors reject "the discredited détente policies" that Washington adopted toward the Soviet Union in the 1970s on the grounds that détente "failed to achieve its goals" and a similar approach today would "yield little cooperation from Chinese leaders." But as the historian Niall Ferguson has persuasively argued in these pages, détente didn't mean "embracing, trusting, or appeasing the Soviets." It meant "recognizing the limits of U.S. power" and "employing a combination of carrots and sticks, and buying time." As Ferguson concludes, "It worked." Pottinger and Gallagher prematurely reject the possibility that détente could similarly work with China. Instead, they dismiss it as appeasement. They also fail to recognize the limits of U.S. power.

Pottinger and Gallagher conclude that Beijing "will never be a reliable partner" because Xi "is not a leader with whom Americans can solve problems" and the CCP "has no desire to coexist indefinitely with great powers that promote liberal values." On the contrary, if one avoids ideological blinders and does not assume that all Chinese policy statements are disingenuous, there is ample evidence for recognizing that Xi and the CCP are in fact interested in constructive engagement and peaceful coexistence with the United States, especially if the alternative is a zero-sum struggle that neither side could sustainably win.

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POTTINGER AND GALLAGHER REPLY

Rush Doshi's critique of our article warrants special attention because Doshi is qualified to serve as a reliable surrogate for the Biden administration on China, given his recent role at the White House, and because his general assessment of the threat posed by the CCP—and his belief that Washington must take proactive steps to frustrate Xi's ambitions—has much in common with our own take.

Still, there remain essential differences between his views and ours about all that Washington should be doing to address the threat, which has quickly metastasized from a "pacing

challenge," as the Biden team politely calls it, into something much scarier, as the CCP is now underwriting proxy wars in multiple theaters in order to undermine the security and credibility of United States and its partners. In short, global events driven by Xi and his "axis of chaos"—Russia, Iran (and its terrorist proxies), North Korea, and Venezuela—are simply overwhelming Biden's China policy. As the Biden team frets about admitting that the United States is now in a cold war, Beijing is leading it into the foothills of a hot one.

THE NEW COLD WAR

Before addressing some key differences with Doshi, let us look at the other critiques. Jessica Chen Weiss and James Steinberg argue against waging a cold war with Beijing because cold wars are dangerous. We don't deny they are dangerous. The problem is that the United States is already in one—not because Americans desired or started it, but because Xi is laser-focused on prevailing in a global struggle in which "capitalism will inevitably perish and socialism will inevitably triumph," as he put it in a quintessential secret speech shortly after rising to power. Xi's internal speeches, edicts, and actions show that he is pursuing global, not just regional, initiatives to discredit and dissolve Western alliances, co-opting international bodies to advance illiberal and autocratic aims, and even undermining the centuries-old Westphalian system of sovereign nation-states. These policies first took shape during the Obama administration, when Washington was at pains to engage and reassure Beijing.

In another statement, Xi said, "Our struggle and contest with Western countries is irreconcilable, so it will inevitably be long, complicated, and sometimes even very sharp." Xi has clearly driven the contest into just such a "sharp" phase. In April, Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated that China is "overwhelmingly the number one supplier" of Russia's war machine and that "Russia would struggle to sustain its assault on Ukraine without China's support." Beijing is following a similar playbook in the Middle East, making itself the primary consumer of sanctioned Iranian oil and providing strong diplomatic and propaganda support for Iran and some of its terrorist proxies in the wake of Hamas's October 7 rampage in southern Israel.

If Washington wants to achieve victory without war in competition with a capable, belligerent Leninist regime, history tells us that it should adapt and apply the best lessons of the Cold War, from the clear-eyed theoretical framing that Kennan provided in the late 1940s to the resolute yet flexible policies that Reagan put into practice in the 1980s—policies that steered the Cold War to a peaceful conclusion that favored free nations.

Nine successive U.S. presidents, from Harry Truman to George H. W. Bush, chose to employ Cold War strategies, albeit with varying approaches. Yet Weiss and Steinberg's reflexive queasiness about borrowing from a half century of U.S. foreign policy causes them to retreat toward even more dangerous ground: indulging the tired notion, contradicted by years of frustrating experience, that a totalitarian Leninist dictatorship can be enticed to "cooperate on key issues of mutual concern" and make that the basis for a stable relationship. This view echoes the folly of the failed détente policies of the 1970s, when a conciliatory approach toward Moscow invited only greater Soviet aggression—aggression that abated only after the

United States adopted a more confrontational approach near the end of the Carter administration and during the Reagan years that followed. The Biden administration is repeating the mistake of the 1970s.

We are reminded of what Doshi wrote in his book, *The Long Game:* "China has repeatedly reneged on its various tactical concessions or returned accommodation by others with eventual hostility or more expansive claims." Why, then, do our critics (including Doshi himself) believe China's recent and minor tactical concessions will follow a different pattern?

VICTIMS OR PERPETRATORS?

The critique of our article by Paul Heer, who once served as the U.S. intelligence community's top Asia analyst, is the true outlier in this debate. Whereas Weiss and Steinberg acknowledge (albeit with conspicuous understatement) that Beijing "is at odds with many of the United States' key international partners" and "pursues economic policies that harm American workers and companies," Heer sees an altogether different regime. In his telling, Beijing is "focused on winning hearts and minds in a multipolar world" and seeking to "maximize China's power, influence, and wealth relative to the United States"—although he grants that Beijing is doing this "ruthlessly and relentlessly."

Heer portrays Xi, and even Putin, as mainly reactive players—victims of changes thrust upon them by unnamed "historical forces and players." He depicts Xi almost as an amiable doofus: someone "interested in constructive engagement and peaceful coexistence with the United States" but who is misquoted, misunderstood, or incapable of expressing himself accurately. (Heer suggests that Xi's comment to Putin in March 2023 that the two leaders were driving changes unseen in a century was a mistranslation. We checked the recording and confirmed that the original Mandarin aligns with the meaning that we and many others—including the aide translating Xi's words to Russian in the moment—first ascribed to Xi's remark.)

Dismissing the goals, resourcefulness, and initiative of dictators is all too common in Washington. Even by that low standard, Heer's optimistic assessment reads like something that might have been written about China a quarter century ago. It would have been wrong back then, too, but it would have been easier to excuse, given Beijing's disciplined policy of strategic deception at the time.

Heer even suggests that the CCP may have been provoked into an existential ideological campaign, partly in response to American officials (singling out the two of us in particular) who have laid out the stakes of the competition in such stark terms. Heer ignores what Doshi rightly identified in his book as "the persistence of China's existential threat perception even as the United States pursued a largely benign and welcoming policy toward China under the policy of engagement." We recommend Heer focus more on what Xi says when he isn't addressing a Western audience.

WEAKNESS IS PROVOCATIVE

Doshi's own critique of our article, by contrast, is as striking for its areas of agreement with our point of view as it is for its differences. Unlike the other responses, Doshi's acknowledges

Beijing's formidable ambitions and capabilities and how threatening they are to U.S. interests (as does the Biden administration's written strategies). It also defends the growing list of steps the Biden administration has taken to strengthen Pacific alliances and restrict Beijing's access to U.S. markets and technology. As Doshi rightly notes, "U.S. policy toward China will need bipartisan foundations to succeed."

Our disagreements, however, are also significant. For starters, Doshi suggests that the differences between the Soviet Union yesterday and China today are so great as to render our proposed cold war strategy moot. In fact, the Soviet and Chinese systems are far more alike than not, and so are the American strategies required to outcompete them. Even the two economies are more alike than many remember. China has the world's second-largest GDP today—and so did the Soviet Union for most of the Cold War. In the 1970s, by the CIA's estimate, the Soviet economy reached 57 percent of U.S. GNP—a share that is not far from the 65 percent of U.S. GDP that the Chinese economy is estimated to amount to today. The Chinese economy, like the Soviet economy, is almost certainly smaller than estimated, and it is going through a crisis reminiscent of the Soviet economic travails that became obvious by the early 1980s. We are the first to admit that reducing the West's economic dependence on China will be much tougher than reducing its dependence on the Soviet Union was, given Beijing's technological prowess. By the same token, the costs of failing to disentangle would also be far greater.

Another blind spot is Doshi's failure to address the cascading collapse of the ability of the United States and its allies to deter their enemies over the past three years—in Afghanistan, in Ukraine, and in the Middle East—and what it says about the shortcomings of the administration's foreign policy in general, including toward China. In March 2022, Biden drew a redline for Xi, warning him not to provide "material support" for Putin's war in Europe. And yet Xi went on to do just that, with only token pushback from Washington—a failure that will probably embolden Beijing to undertake far more dangerous steps, including with regard to Taiwan.

The facts call into serious question Doshi's claim that the Biden administration's "intensified diplomacy" with Beijing has helped "mitigate the risk of escalatory spirals." By our reckoning, there is a lot of spiraling going on—in Europe, in the Middle East, in the South China Sea—and Beijing is at the center of it. Had the Biden administration adopted at the outset a stronger and more resolute policy toward U.S. adversaries—including, crucially, a major increase in defense spending—it may well have prevented the darkening geopolitical landscape that developed over the past three years. The Biden administration, inexplicably and inexcusably, is, in inflation-adjusted terms, cutting U.S. defense spending, even as it has initiated trillions of dollars in new spending on pandemic relief and progressive domestic priorities and is attempting to spend hundreds of billions of dollars more on college debt relief.

THE SOURCES OF CHINESE CONDUCT

Perhaps our most important disagreement with Doshi concerns his suggestion that imposing greater costs on Beijing and deeper constraints on the Chinese economy would make Beijing

more aggressive, rather than less. That view is mistaken. One of the paradoxes of Marxist-Leninist dictatorships is that the more comfortable they are, the more aggressive they become.

It works the other way, too. The historian Richard Pipes, who served on the National Security Council during the Reagan administration and played a key role in fashioning its successful Soviet policy, held as a "central thesis" that "the Soviet regime will become less aggressive only as a result of failures and worries about its ability to govern effectively and not from a sense of enhanced security and confidence." When he wrote those words, in his 1984 book, *Survival Is Not Enough*, he was predicting the internal forces that would ultimately unravel the Soviet Communist Party. Weiss and Steinberg even allude to this dynamic, perhaps unwittingly, when they say that China's current "economic headwinds," combined with policies the United States is using to widen its economic and technological lead over China, "have created a window" for more stable bilateral relations.

It stands to reason—and Cold War history is replete with examples—that the weaker a communist dictatorship becomes, the more manageable a threat it becomes for Washington. Hence, the United States should first do nothing to strengthen the CCP's power and confidence, which are sources of its aggression. As we made clear in our article, this isn't the same as pursuing "regime change." It is merely realistic and strategic thinking. Our view is the same as Pipes's: "This is a call not for subverting Communism but for letting Communism subvert itself." Washington shouldn't be giving Beijing time—which the Biden administration's détente-like policy does—to worm its way out of the economic conundrum it created for itself. Chinese leaders have long believed that the United States is trying to suppress Chinese economic growth anyway (even though it did precisely the opposite for more than three decades).

Washington shouldn't be afraid to pursue peaceful victory in this competition. Beijing isn't afraid of pursuing victory by any means necessary. In a major address in 2020 about China's 1950 decision to fight the United States on the Korean Peninsula, Xi said, "War must be fought to deter aggression, force must be met with force, and victory is the best way to win peace and respect." As we wrote in our original article: "China isn't aiming for a stalemate. Neither should America."

Original Content

No Substitute for Victory

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Pullquote

If Beijing concluded that the United States sought total victory, it would have little reason to exercise restraint.

Adopting a confrontational posture toward Beijing would reinforce the Chinese leadership's embrace of authoritarian policies.

There is ample evidence that Xi and the CCP are interested in constructive engagement and peaceful coexistence with the United States.

The United States should do nothing to strengthen the CCP's power and confidence, which are sources of its aggression.
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