

With or without Xi Jinping, U.S.-China rivalry is here to stay

Beijing has always had aspirations of overtaking Washington

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When Xi Jinping became head of the Chinese Communist Party a decade ago, he ushered in a new era of foreign policy by jettisoning a key dictum of late leader Deng Xiaoping that had guided Beijing's grand strategy for more than two decades.

Deng, China's top leader through the 1980s, had advised his countrymen to "hide your strength and bide your time." In place of this approach, Xi proclaimed a "Chinese dream" of restoring the nation's past glory and position at the top of the hierarchy of nations.

During his first year in power, Xi ordered the building of large artificial islands on disputed reefs in the South China Sea, established an air defense identification zone in the East China Sea that required all aircraft passing through to report their flight plans, and launched what would become the Belt and Road Initiative.

By exerting authority over traffic through area waters and skies and binding regional countries physically, financially and politically tightly to Beijing through loans and investments, Xi threw down a gauntlet to the U.S., the world's leading power and the dominant naval force in the Pacific.

Yet, in fact, Xi himself is in no way the key driver of China's rivalry with America.

Ever since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Beijing has had the long-term ambition to overtake the U.S. Said Chairman Mao Zedong in 1955, "Our objective is to catch up with America and then to surpass America."

Less than three years later, he launched the Great Leap Forward as an economic and social campaign to overtake the U.K. in industrial output within 15 years. This was a miserable failure, but even decades later, similar motivations guided Deng.

"In the mid-1970s, my father looked around China's periphery, to the small dragon economies," his daughter told an interviewer. "They were growing at 8% to 10% per year and these economies had a considerable technological lead over China. If we were to surpass them and resume our rightful place in the region and ultimately the world, China would have to grow faster than them."

So despite very different domestic and foreign policies, Mao, Deng and now Xi represent phases of the same Chinese quest for restored world primacy.

In Mao's time, China's rivalry with the U.S. was open but far from comprehensive. It was neither open nor comprehensive in Deng's time, as the Soviet Union was then the focus for both Washington and Beijing. But now the two are open, comprehensive rivals under Xi.

Xi has surely tried to put his fingerprint on history, but open rivalry would have emerged sooner or later once China had passed Japan to become the world's second-largest economy. That took place in 2010, two years before Xi's accession.

The new rivalry remained one-sided at first, as U.S. President Barack Obama refused to engage in a strategic competition with China.

It became two way only in 2017 when the administration of Donald Trump publicly labeled Washington's engagement with Beijing since the 1970s a failure. Bipartisan consensus then quickly built up around viewing China as a strategic threat, locking the Biden administration into largely maintaining Trump's stance.

The root of great power rivalry is not the policy or personality of individual leaders, however powerful they are. Rather, conflict stems from the fact that the international system needs a leading power and tends to allocate more influence, prestige and resources to that nation, which in turn can spur a contest for supremacy.

Great powers with the will to vie for supremacy do not typically abandon such ambitions until the cost becomes unbearable. Historically, great powers settled their rivalries via direct warfare, but nuclear weapons have rendered this option utterly useless.

Because of nuclear deterrence, great power conflict in recent decades has taken the form of proxy wars, as seen in Korea, Vietnam and Afghanistan during the Cold War, or in Ukraine now, or with less deadly consequences -- with political, economic and information warfare and arms races.

This has massively reduced fatalities for clashing great powers but can substantially lengthen the duration of conflict. U.S. involvement in World War II, the last armed contest between great powers before the nuclear age, lasted less than four years and led to around 300,000 American deaths. This exceeds the figure for American casualties for the four decades of the Cold War, including its proxy wars.

The new cold war between the U.S. and China is likely to last longer than the Soviet one because China's economy is roughly three quarters the size of the U.S. With the gap likely to narrow further, Beijing has far more ability than the Soviet Union did to foot the bill for arms races and proxy wars. The Soviet economy at its peak was only around half the size of America's.

Whether Xi steps down in the 2030s after a couple more terms or stays in power for life, the U.S.-China rivalry will continue until one can no longer bear the cost. The contest between them likely has far to run, but hopefully will cause fewer deaths than the last such struggle.