

## ARGUMENT

# America Will Only Win When China's Regime Fails

There are two possible outcomes of U.S.-China competition—but Washington should prepare for the more turbulent one.

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BY ZACK COOPER, HAL BRANDS | MARCH 11, 2021, 3:07 AM

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Competition between the United States and China has begun, but how will it end? There is a bipartisan consensus that Sino-American relations will be defined primarily by rivalry across multiple regions and dimensions of statecraft for years to come. Yet there is little clarity on what U.S. leaders hope will happen after that. Washington has accepted the reality of competition without identifying a theory of victory. There is no lack of suggestions, but U.S. leaders have yet to articulate how this competition will lead to something other than unending tension and danger.

At several points, the Trump administration argued that rivalry with China was caused by the nature of the Communist Party, implying that the rivalry would last as long as the regime did. Yet the administration also insisted, confusingly, that its approach was not based “on an attempt to change the PRC’s domestic governance model.” Similarly, the Biden administration has accepted strategic competition with China—“extreme competition,” as the president phrased it—without publicly clarifying how that competition might ultimately be resolved.

There are many possible outcomes to the Sino-American competition, from the United States ceding a sphere of influence to China, to mutual accommodation, to Chinese collapse, to a devastating global conflict. Yet if the goal of competition is to secure a better peace by means short of war, then the pivotal question becomes whether the United States can achieve this outcome by changing the minds of Chinese leaders—convincing them that expansion and aggrandizement is futile—or whether it will require the decline of Chinese power or the downfall of the Chinese Communist Party.

In short, can Sino-American tensions lead to competitive coexistence? Or must this rivalry culminate in regime failure via the weakening or political evolution of the United States’ challenger? U.S. officials should certainly hope for the first outcome, but

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## **Advocates of competitive coexistence believe the United States can**

eventually change the minds of Chinese leaders, convincing them not to seek regional preeminence and upset the U.S.-led international order in Asia and beyond. The hope is that if the United States demonstrates, over a period of years, that it can maintain a favorable balance of power in the Western Pacific, preserve its key economic and technological advantages, and rally overlapping state coalitions to uphold key rules and norms, then Beijing might adopt less bellicose (and self-defeating) policies.

In either case, U.S.-China relations would not necessarily become harmonious; there would still be elements of military, geopolitical, economic, technological, and diplomatic competition. But Beijing would reduce the sharpness of its challenge, particularly on issues—such as Taiwan and the U.S. alliance structure in East Asia—where U.S. vital interests are at stake. The goal, whether codified by a diplomatic settlement or simply arrived at implicitly, would be a more stable relationship where the danger of conflict is reduced, the United States' key strategic interests are preserved, and areas of potential cooperation gradually expand.

This competitive coexistence theory updates, but does not discard, the logic of U.S. policy toward China in the post-Cold War era. It holds that Washington can still successfully shape Beijing's behavior through the right mix of incentives, although it will have to rely more on collective pressure and less on positive inducements. It maintains the hope that the Chinese Communist Party may mellow over time: Even if Chinese President Xi Jinping has chosen confrontation, perhaps his successors will be more moderate. This approach thus relies on effective Sino-American diplomacy, not just to avoid war and identify possibilities for near-term cooperation but also to explore the possibility of a longer-term way of life.

This approach is attractive because it offers the possibility of strategic success without the downfall of one of the protagonists. Yet it invites a series of questions. Does the fact that Beijing has become so avowedly assertive, not just regionally but globally, indicate that any softening of China's policies may be many years in the future? Indeed, if Xi holds onto power as long as Chairman Mao Zedong did—until the age of 82—then a post-Xi leadership would not emerge until 2035 at the earliest. In addition, how would the United States know if the Chinese Communist Party made a strategic decision to lower its geopolitical sights as opposed to a tactical decision to temporarily reduce

had in mind when they spoke of “peaceful coexistence” and sought to reduce tensions in the 1950s and after. The Chinese Communist Party may no longer be Marxist, but it hails from the same Leninist tradition that views strategic deception, obfuscation of intentions, and other artifices as essential tools of geopolitical rivalry.

Then there is the biggest problem with this approach: It may not reflect the reality of the struggle in which the United States is engaged. Competitive coexistence holds that the rivalry between the United States and China is severe but not immutable. In other words, a powerful Communist Party-led China can eventually be reconciled to a world order where the United States, its allies and partners, and its democratic values remain predominant. Yet what if that belief is illusory because the rivalry is actually more fundamental? What if the Chinese Communist Party desires a more thoroughgoing revision of the international system, in part because it perceives a system led by a democratic superpower and premised on the superiority of democratic values as an existential threat to its own survival?

Although Sino-American tensions have peaked under Xi, Rush Doshi, director of the Brookings China Strategy Initiative, has shown that those tensions reflect something deeper than the outsized ambitions of a single statesman. Leading Chinese officials have publicly affirmed the party’s view that the United States has always been committed to undermining the Communist regime. Nadège Rolland, a senior fellow at the National Bureau of Asian Research, suggests the party will have tremendous difficulty ever reconciling itself to an international order whose liberal principles conflict directly with the government’s illiberal domestic rule. Even in the early 1990s, at the dawn of post-Cold War engagement policy, Chinese military officials argued that the contrast between U.S. and Chinese systems of government made it “impossible to fundamentally improve Sino-U.S. relations.” Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Beijing pursued a strategy of subtly “blunting” U.S. power, setting the conditions for China’s move “closer to the center of the world stage,” as Xi has put it.

Soothing win-win rhetoric aside, the Chinese Communist Party is governed by a fundamentally zero-sum mindset. This bodes ill for the prospect of a long-term strategic accommodation. Moreover, the party’s increasingly coercive behavior over the last few years, its horrifying crimes against its Uyghur population, and its utterly irresponsible conduct at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate how fundamentally the regime’s concept of self-interest diverges from anything acceptable to the United States and other liberal democracies. In short, the United States needs to reckon with the possibility that acute Sino-American antagonism will persist so long as

**If this is the case, then it may be naive to think that even a long period** of vigorous competition by the United States would bring about a mellowing of the Chinese Communist Party. Instead, rivalry could persist in a fairly intense form until the party loses its ability to prosecute it. This could come about due to either a decline in Chinese power or a fundamental change in the nature of the ruling regime. In this scenario, the United States' theory of victory begins to look similar to that offered by containment during the Cold War, when historian George Kennan argued that the Soviets "looked forward to a duel of infinite duration" and the United States must prepare accordingly. In this case, competition would not be a relatively short bridge to a more stable, less hostile relationship but rather a longer bridge to the collapse of China's power or transformation of its government.

According to this regime-failure theory, what will ultimately end the Sino-American competition is the accumulated effect of the profound internal stresses China faces combined with consistent external resistance. If the United States and its allies and partners are successful in checking China's aggrandizement, then the combination of slowing economic growth, a growing debt bubble, a slow-motion demographic catastrophe, and other internal domestic stresses could lead to a marked decline in China's ability to challenge the international order. In such a world, Beijing's hostility toward Washington could become less strategically problematic, even if hostility persists.

Alternatively, the same pressures could ultimately lead to an evolution in Chinese governance, either toward democracy or simply a less aggressive form of autocracy. In either case, the United States' primary task would be to hold the line geopolitically for as long as it takes these internal processes to unfold. The United States might also seek to marginally accelerate the party's downfall by showcasing its drawbacks or limiting access to certain key technologies, which would impede economic growth and complicate the consolidation of a high-tech Chinese security state.

These are grim prescriptions, precisely because the regime-failure scenario echoes an experience—the Cold War—that almost no one wants to relive. The regime-failure theory also raises some serious questions. A Chinese Communist Party that fears its power or control is slipping could become more aggressive in the near term. The concerted use of offensive measures to increase the strains on that regime could also

whether the combination of external resistance and pressure would hasten the decay of the Chinese Communist Party rather than inadvertently helping it maintain control by stoking Chinese nationalism.

That said, this approach is not as radical as it might sound. It need not involve actively promoting regime change any more than the United States' Cold War strategy actively sought to overthrow the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. It simply involves accepting that the nature of the Chinese Communist Party imposes severe limitations on how much the relationship can improve so long as the party retains power. This approach also does not require forswearing diplomacy any more than the Cold War precluded cooperation on arms control, smallpox eradication, or the tacit acceptance of stabilizing mechanisms. But this view holds that diplomacy cannot fundamentally resolve the competition, absent deeper changes within China.

**Why should the United States spend any time thinking about a long-term theory of victory in a competition that is just getting underway?** Given how poorly that competition is going in certain key areas, it may be tempting to focus on figuring out how to handle China in the here and now while deferring intellectual debates on the distant future. Perhaps the United States should just go about the business of managing the problem rather than trying to determine how to solve it.

But not identifying a desired equilibrium for U.S.-China competition would be a mistake. Strategy involves determining how actions taken today will contribute to the realization of more distant objectives. Different theories of victory might produce different conceptions of the role that bilateral diplomacy and offensive pressure should play in U.S. statecraft. Moreover, if we don't know the outcome we desire, how can we measure the effectiveness of our policy approaches? And if rivalry with China is indeed the fundamental challenge for U.S. strategy today, then how long will U.S. citizens tolerate costly actions without knowing their ultimate objective?

It is difficult to say with certainty which theory of victory is analytically superior, but the balance of evidence supports the more pessimistic theory discussed here—that competition should be seen as a bridge to long-term changes in Chinese power or in the way China is governed. That's a relatively dark view of where Sino-American

Party leaders seem to think and if Chinese ambitions are as extensive as a growing number of Sinologists have documented, then that view may also be the most realistic.

This conclusion leads, however, to a final problem: At the moment, the theory of victory that holds together analytically may not be the theory of victory that best holds the counter-China coalition together diplomatically. A multilateral collective pressure strategy is necessary to demonstrate patience and firmness to Beijing. This requires assembling distinct but overlapping coalitions to balance Beijing's power militarily, economically, technologically, and ideologically.

So far, the task of rallying these coalitions has been complicated by the fact that many U.S. allies and partners in Asia, Europe, and elsewhere are still seeking to avoid a zero-sum choice between Washington and Beijing. Few of these countries would welcome a U.S. strategy explicitly predicated on regime failure; in fact, just talking about this approach in public could make it harder to rally the coalitions needed to meet China's challenge. It is not surprising, then, that there has remained so much ambiguity in U.S. assessments of where the rivalry is headed because the requirements of analytical clarity seem at odds—for now, at least—with the requirements of diplomatic efficacy.

There is no easy solution to this conundrum. Eventually, the U.S. government must be candid about its China strategy: There is no way to rally the domestic commitment and resources necessary to succeed if U.S. officials soft-pedal the underlying problem. Democracies cannot, and should not, maintain one strategic agenda in private and a second one for public and international consumption. In the near term, there may be good reasons to highlight the practical aspects of building the coalitions needed to counter China while downplaying the more sensitive question of how this might all end. But in the longer term, it is hard to see how the United States can win the defining rivalry of this century without being clear about what it is trying to achieve.

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